

SEPT.



BEST WESTERN

BIG 132 PAGES

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CUSTER, HERE WE COME!
SMASH FEATURE-LENGTH NOVEL BY
WILLIAM HOPSON



THREE GUNHAWKS
AND A GIRL

A Two-Gun Wedding
Awaited The Ranny
Who Had What It Took
To Tame Anne York!

LEAD SLAMMING
SUPER NOVEL
by
D.B. NEWTON

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Thousands of Other Fellows...***

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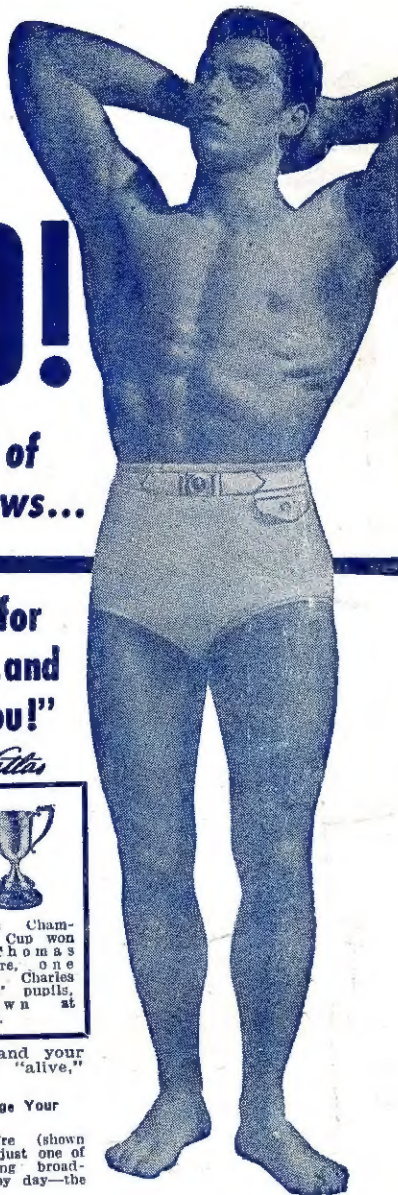
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BEST WESTERN

SEPT
1951

R. O. ERISMAN, Editor
ARTHUR LANE, Associate

★ ★ BRAND NEW BOOK-LENGTH SUPER NOVEL ★ ★ THREE GUNHAWKS AND A GIRL D. B. Newton 6

There wasn't a man on Rimrock range would have chosen to take on the Yorks. Four of them, there were, the three hardbitten brothers and the girl, and Annie York was as wild and trail-wise as her saltiest kin... The stranger didn't know about this; he wore one gun in a greased holster, and, given sufficient argument, was prepared to throw down on hellion, cowgirl, or hole-in-the-wall horde!

★ ★ PLUS 2 FEATURE-LENGTH NOVELS ★ ★

CUSTER, HERE WE COME! William Hopson 81

If gun-backed Texas cattlebarons were running their herds into Nations country, it meant Indians on the warpath. And if the Cheyennes and Comanches went on the prod, it meant massacre—with helpless homesteaders and ranchers whipsawed between hot lead and tomahawk, with a lone Army sergeant to hold off the bloody hell!

LEAVE YOUR HOLSTER HOME, HARDCASE! W. P. Brothers 98

Anything could happen and did, when the girl-boss of the Lazy K brought an owlhooter home as an honored guest....

★ ★ 2 ACTION-PACKED NOVELETS ★ ★

THOSE THAT FIGHT John Lumsden 58

Dead, it was certain he'd never rescue Dillon range from this land-grabber scourge. By staying alive he could at least always be a potential force for law and justice. So it wasn't that he just wanted to save his own hide, John Mallard kept telling himself, when it came to showdown....

DEVIL AND OLD MAN GILLIS Wayne D. Overholser 69

He was the sheriff...and the sheriff had to heed a call for help...whether it came from a big rancher, or a trail bum...or a dark-haired cowgirl he was once in love with.

★ ★ 2 CRACK SHORT STORIES ★ ★

BLOOD OF A BADMAN Johanas L. Bouma 120

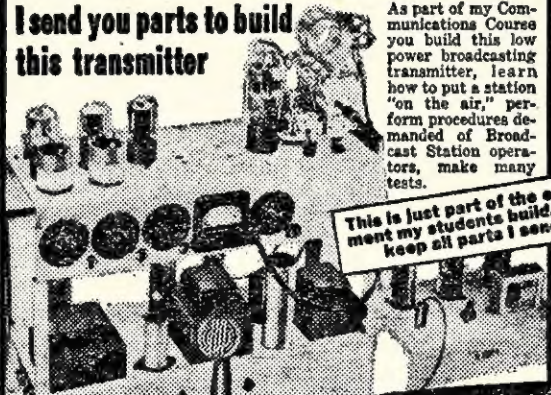
Their old man had ended up dancing on the end of a rope—so Tim had promised their mom he'd never let Dan look down the dark trails....

DEATH IN THE DUST Frank Latham 126

No, nobody would get that five thousand dollars killer bounty so long as Sam Larson was sheriff.....

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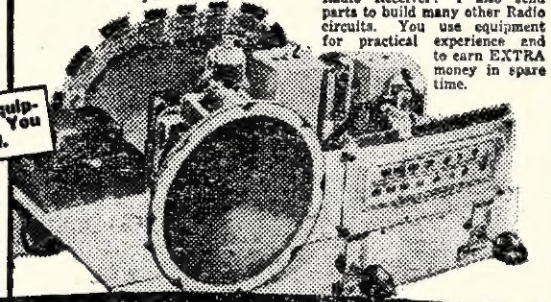
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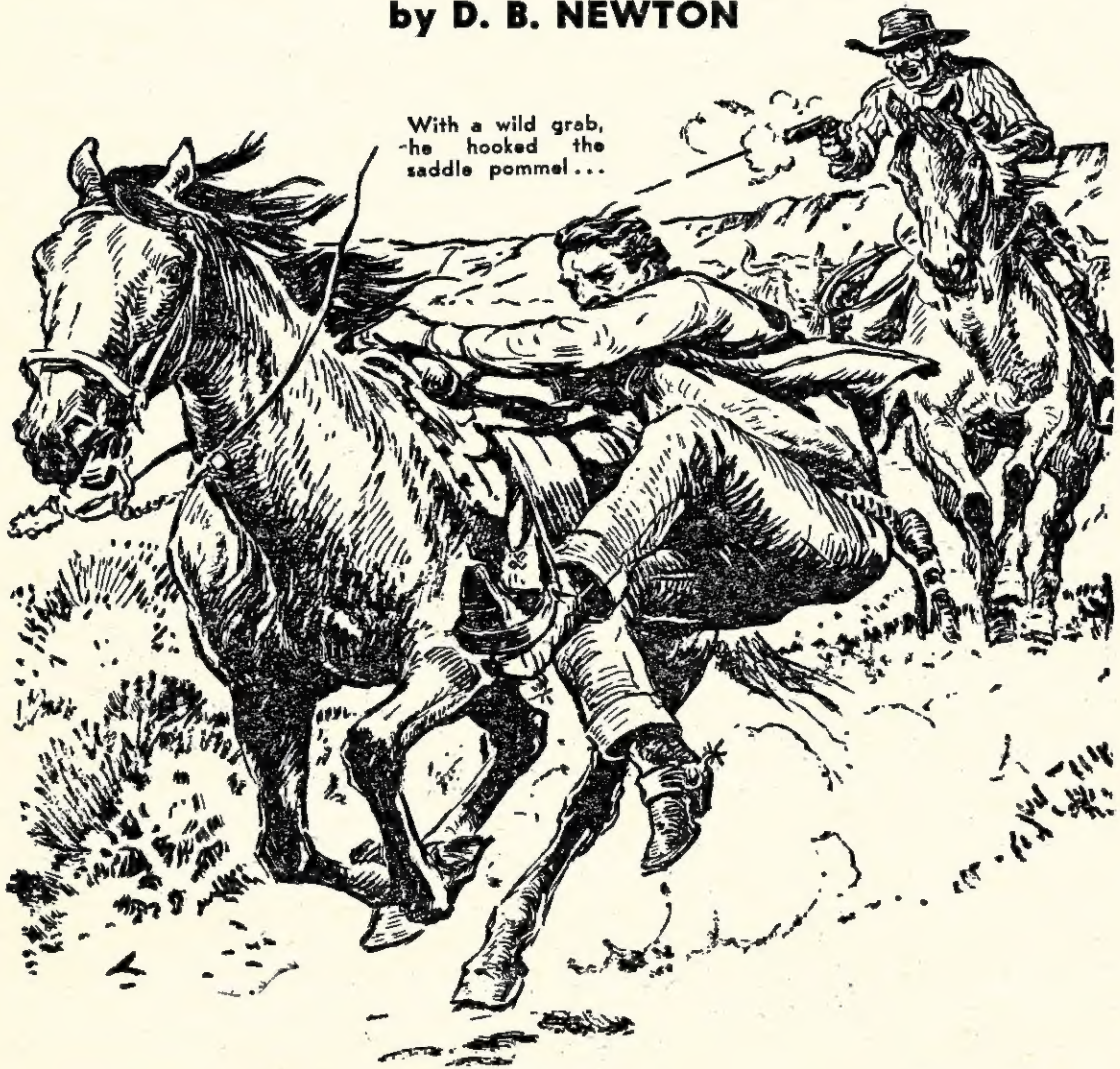
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THREE GUNHAWKS AND

by D. B. NEWTON



CHAPTER I

JIM REASONER saw her first as he stood in the open door of the barber shop, stripping out of denim brush jacket. His mind on other, urgent matters, he happened to glance up at the ragged thud of hoofs; and then something held him the way he was, for a long moment—one arm pulled half out of its sleeve, his eyes fastened on the quartet of riders that went joggling past in the bleak spring sunlight.

Three men—and the girl...

The barber's other customer, who had just quit the chair and was getting Stetson and coat from a wall hook, sauntered forward and paired Reasoner's glance. When he saw what the stranger was staring at, he vented a short and expressive grunt. "Them's the Yorks," he offered information. "Yessir—a plumb wild outfit if there ever was one. Wild, and mean!"

"The girl, too?" Reasoner queried, off-handedly.

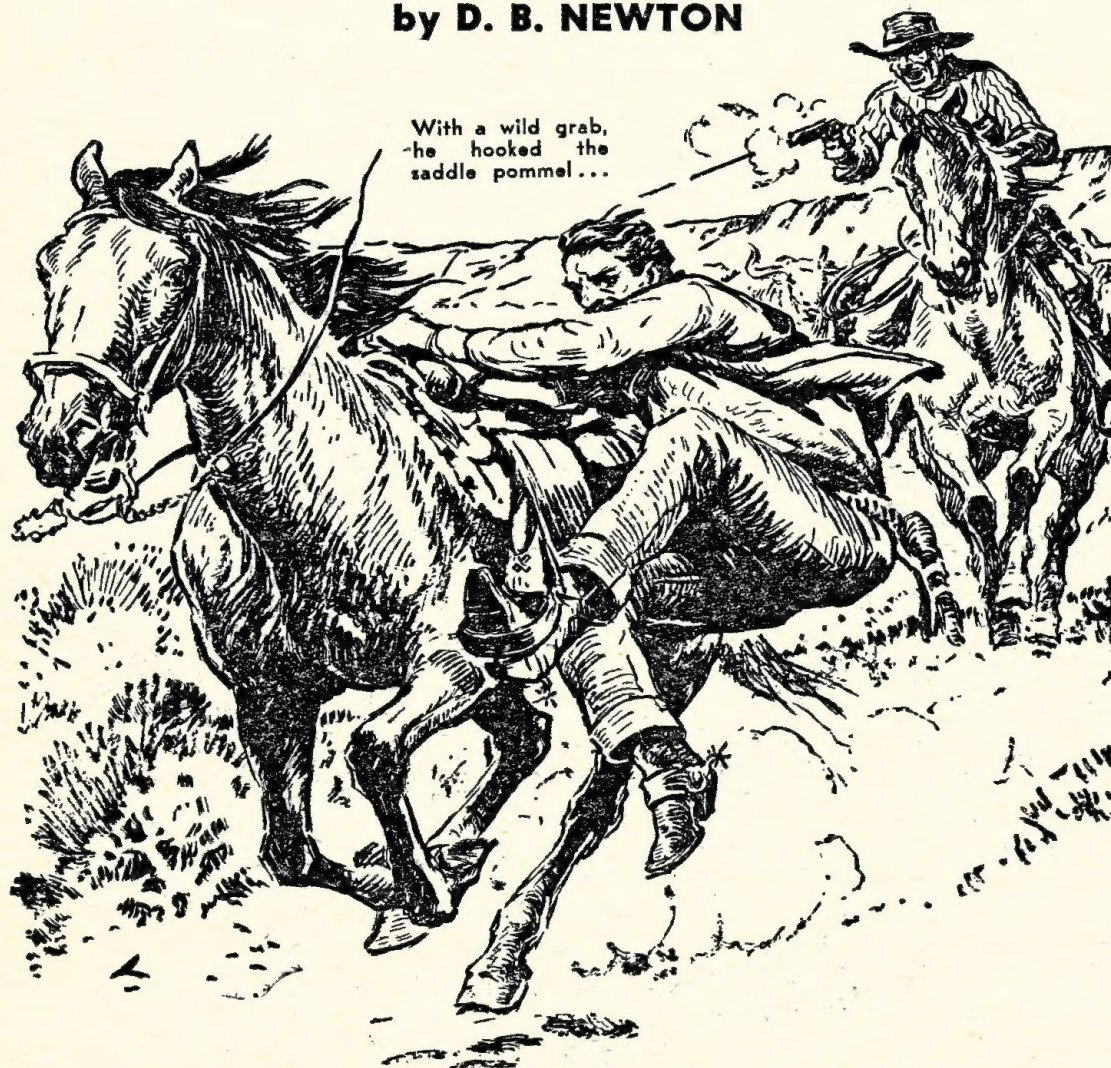
His question earned him a know-

A TWO-GUN WEDDING AWAITED THE RANNY WHO

THREE GUNHAWKS AND A GIRL

by D. B. NEWTON

LUSTY, LEAD-SLAMMING,
BOOK-LENGTH SUPER NOVEL!



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A TWO-GUN WEDDING AWAITED THE RANNY WHO

HAD WHAT IT TOOK TO TAME ANNIE YORK!

A GIRL

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ing, sideward look. "Quite an eye-ful, huh? But me—I wouldn't want to be the one to try and tame Annie York! Oh, no! I'd advise any man to think twice before he tackled that filly—or her brothers, either! You can have enough trouble in this country, without that!"

Reasoner said nothing, watching. The horses were rawboned, tough range mustangs, their saddles battered hulls lacking ornament, a Rocking Y brand smeared on gaunt-shoulders. And it seemed to him the York brothers strangely resembled their mounts.

Big, hulking fellows, those three, with strong, hollow-jowled faces topped by shaggy, dead-black manes that spilled across their ears and shirt collars. Annie York's hair was of the same color, uncombed and wind-tangled; but it framed a heart-shaped face that looked good in profile, the coarse York features somehow transmuted, in her, to a certain delicacy. Her body was small, well-shaped, full-breasted; riding, she carried her head high, with the same cocksure boldness as her brothers.

She was probably wild, all right.

Jim Reasoner watched until the girl was out of sight—she seemed to invite the same kind of open scrutiny you might give a well-bred horse, or any untamed and beautiful animal. Afterwards, without further comment, he turned away abruptly and finished removing the jacket; hung it and his shapeless, sweated hat upon a peg, slipped off his neck-cloth and stuffed it into a nocket.

It would have been more comfortable to remove his shell-studded cartridge belt, as well; but he kept that, shifting gun and holster forward as he walked over to the waiting chair and eased into its hard leather seat. The baldheaded barber levered him back into a reclining position; a moment later a steaming towel was piled on Reasoner's face and he was listening to the zing and swish of the long-shanked razor against the strop.

He relaxed into the comfort of the first town-bought shave he'd had in

a couple weeks of hard, dusty trail-ing.

The other customer had remained in the shop, leaning against the door jamb while he rolled a smoke. He told the proprietor, with heavy humor, "Them York boys don't look like they gave you much of their trade."

"That's for sure," grunted the barber. "I doubt they've ever shaved; and when those manes get too long and start falling into their vittles, they probably have Annie go to work and chop 'em off with the butcher knife."

"Well, and you don't hear me complaining; Crib, and Dale, and Ollie are three customers I can do without! I'd likely get nervous and take a nick out of one of 'em—and when that happened it would just be too bad for me!"

The towel came off Reasoner's face, and the lather went on; then came the deft scrape and pull of the honed blade. Outside, a constant tide of boot-sound rolled hollowly along the boardwalk plankings; this was a Saturday afternoon, with Rimrock town taking on an activity that was even more than its normal weekend resurgence. For, on Monday, calf branding would begin; the excitement of spring roundup was in the air, with cowhands anxious for a last spree before they went out with the wagons on a two-week swing across the range.

SOMEONE, passing, called a greeting to the cowman leaning in the doorway: "Howdy, Bergman!" and stopped to exchange pleasantries and a moment's idle gossip about the usual cowcountry staples: beef, and grass, and weather, and especially next week's doings. The range was greening up nicely, they opined, promising well for the summer ahead. The cold season had been mild, with not much likelihood of turning up a bad winter kill in the protected reaches of the valley.

Reasoner listened without appearing to. He was a stranger, in a new town, summoned here by a lifelong friend's urgent plea for help, but not knowing any more than that about

the nature of the trouble or of the job that faced him. In such circumstances, he had learned in the past that you could often pick up useful information merely by keeping your mouth shut and lending an ear to casual local talk.

Now this policy paid him dividends when he heard the newcomer remark: "Walt Shapley just rode in."

"Shapley!" Bregman's voice was quickly hard, echoing the name. "I did figure I'd begun to smell something bad all of a sudden!"

You couldn't have told, from anything in Reasoner's stretched-out shape and lathered face, that he had turned instantly alert and attentive. He kept his eyes shut; he might even have been asleep, except for the slow wagging of one spurred boot cocked up on the footrest.

The barber had paused in his work. He said, "He got the crew with him?"

"No. Nobody but that foreman of his."

Bregman gave a grunt. "I'd call it being blame foolish! Harbin's too old, and too slow on the draw to do him much good. And Shapley's not only an old man himself, but an Easterner to boot..."

"What are you two hinting at?"

"The Yorks," the barber explained. "They're in town—all three of them. With Shapley in, it could mean trouble."

The other man gave a low whistle. "Blame right, it could! Crib York don't talk just to hear himself—not the kind of things he's been sayin' about Diamond Wheel!"

"Anybody claim he's much mistaken?" Bregman growled heavily.

"Well, I certainly won't argue with you. But still, nothin's been proved—"

"Proof!" Bregman shrugged, as though to dismiss an unpleasant topic. "Aw, the devil with it! Come on and get a drink!"

"Suits me," the other agreed. "Only let's stay away from the Seven-Up. Shapley's there and if them Yorks should show—the lightning might strike..."

They were gone; shortly afterward,

the barber finished his work. Jim Reasoner unhitched his lean length from the chair as soon as he was free of the towel, fishing in his pocket for change. He was frowning as he moved over to the wall peg for his hat and coat.

Getting into them, he said, "This Shapley you mention—doesn't sound like he was too popular hereabouts?"

The barber shrugged. "It ain't for me to take sides. But what would you make of a brand like Diamond Wheel, stranger? It's a dang sight too complicated and unwieldy to please some of Shapley's neighbors—they claim nobody could have designed such an iron for any honest purpose."

"Lewt Bregman, that you was just talking to, owns Circle Dot; the Yorks run a Rocking Y on their cattle. And there's Anchor, and Monk Langdon's Rafter L. You can see how Shapley's iron could be made to cover any of them. Bergman and the Yorks in particular own that Shapley's a crook, for all he looks like a tenderfoot Easterner. They lay a lot of their blame on this ramrod, Harbin, that he brought in with him."

"Then Shapley's a newcomer to the range?"

"Been here a bit under two years. As a matter of fact, the Yorks come in a month or more later'n him, but he didn't choose his brand before their Rocking Y was registered. The talk against Shapley started afterward—a year ago, maybe, when some of the ranchers found they'd begun tallying short."

"And they figure their beef is now running a Diamond Wheel?"

But the other suddenly decided he'd said all he wanted to. "I'm only a barber," he grunted. "I don't aim to have anyone think I'd take sides in a matter that don't concern me..."

Reasoner nodded good day and walked out of the shop, rubbing a stinging, cleanly-shaven jaw; he halted looking along the busy street of the cowtown. A deep frown was on his rugged, bronzed features, pondering the things he had heard. He fumbled at his shirt pocket for

tobacco and papers, then changed his mind and stuffed them back again. He was beginning to wonder, more than ever, just what he was getting into.

HHE TURNED suddenly and started at a solid, ground-eating stride along the echoing planks of the walk. And as he went, his right hand touched the filled holster and swung it around again to the side of his leg, settling it once more into proper position.

He found the Seven-Up without much looking—Rimrock had three saloons but this was the largest. It dominated the town's main intersection, with a roofed gallery running across two sides and batwing doors set in the angle they made. Long hitch rails flanked both wings of the veranda, and cowponies stood slackhipped at the tooth-marked poles.

Just as Reasoner swung his lean body up the broad steps to the porch, a confusion of yelling voices broke out within the building.

He pulled over toward one side, barely in time to avoid a collision; for at that instant the hanging doors split open and a puncher came tumbling out and down the steps past him, shouting: "Look out! The Yorks have got Walt Shapley cornered—it looks like a shootin'—!"

The big building resounded to the frightened shouting and the stampeding of booted feet within. Jim Reasoner waited where he was, while the swinging doors winnowed and more men came spilling out in the wake of the first, some of them hatless and all wild with haste to get clear of danger.

Gradually the stampede ended, the racket within the saloon dropped off, to be replaced by a sudden quiet; the only yelling now was outside, in the rutted street, where a crowd was already gathering but no one venturing to come within a dozen yards of the Seven-Up. At the hitch rails, the tied saddle brons were stirring, ears laid back, their sensitive natures catching the nervous excitement of the men.

Quite deliberately, then, Jim Rea-

soner pushed away from the veranda upright, where he'd drawn aside to let the fleeing customers tear past him. Deliberately he strode across the empty veranda and, stabbing open a panel of the green-painted half-doors, walked into the saloon.

A dead silence met him, and the sour smell of whiskey and stale tobacco, and a semi-gloom that was blinding after the brilliance of full sunlight. As the doors swished shut behind him Reasoner caught the scrape of a boot, somewhere to his right, and it pulled his head sharply in that direction; dimly, his eyes adjusting to the darkness, he made out shadowy figures against the wall, motionless, drawn back there out of the direct line of possible gunfire. He gave them only a glance.

For he had spotted the Yorks. The three black-haired men had entered by a side entrance and they were spread out, with scowls on their craggy faces and the promise of violence in the way they stood, half-crouched, big hands lifted close to the grips of holstered sixguns. They were focussed on a pair of men who stood together at the bar, opposite, and Reasoner switched to these.

It wasn't hard to identify Walt Shapley. An Easterner, the barber shop gossipers had labeled him. He wore a suit coat, trousers with the legs left outside boot tops, a soft, narrow-brimmed hat set square atop his white-thatched head. His mustache was white too, and neatly trimmed; his face, otherwise clean shaven, looked soft and not scored by years of strong Western sunlight and weather.

THE OTHER oldtimer was his foreman, Matt Harbin—horny-handed, squint-eyed, dressed in well-worn range garb. He stood next to his boss and glared at the three black-maned brothers, and now it was Harbin's voice that lashed out, finally breaking the unbearable silence that lay upon the room:

"All right, you three! Here we are—lookin' at you! You've made loud talk about us. Now, if this is

the kind of odds you like—go ahead! Start something!"

"Wait! No!"

It was a frenzied squawk that came, startlingly, from across the room where a door marked "OFFICE" had suddenly been hurled open. A man strode forward, hand up flung as though the gesture would hold back the violence that seemed ready to break loose. Solidly built, he was perhaps a little too well-dressed for his surroundings, his town clothes contrasting oddly with the range garb of the other men. "No gunplay!" he cried, hoarsely. "Please! Not in the Seven-Up..."

Past this man's shoulder, in the same fleeting moment, Jim Reasoner glimpsed another face—a face which, unlikely enough, he thought he recognized. It was one he remembered from a different time, and a range some thousand miles distant. But he was given little time to think about it; for already, the foremost of the three Yorks had started a black-furred hand swooping toward holstered gunmetal.

Reasoner dropped his own right hand. For all the haste with which he moved, it seemed an effortless thing. His fingers slapped metal, curved about it; the gun blurred up, tipped level. It streaked fire; and to the crash of the shot, a cry of pain broke from the leader of the Yorks.

The weapon, only half-way out of holster, slipped from his hand and went spinning across the room, as the black-haired man staggered and clutched a bullet-shattered arm with his good hand.

"Hold it, you two!" snapped Reasoner. His smoking gun swiveled to catch the remaining pair of brothers, and they froze the way they were, with draws barely started. Their black eyes had found him finally and they glared across the lazy drift of powder-smoke from his Colt muzzle.

Somewhere behind him, a man croaked hoarsely: "My gawd! I was lookin' right past his elbow when Crib York started to pull. Yet I never even saw this fellow make his draw—"

This broke the grip of astonish-

ment, and the silence dissolved in uproar. Through the other voices, Matt Harbin's cry sounded: "Jim! Jim Reasoner!" And the Diamond Wheel ramrod came striding toward him, his face a little drawn under its mahogany coloring, one gnarled, rope-scarred fist extended in welcome. "Jim, dang you! You certainly picked a time to show!"

Reasoner nodded, tersely. "How're you, Matt?" But he didn't remove his stare from the Yorks, and now he told them: "You better take your brother Crib and pull out of here. He's going to need a doctor for that arm—in fact, the next time you feel like gunning down a pair of old men, I don't reckon he'll be a lot of help to you!"

"He's right. You better leave!" By this time the overly-dressed man from the saloon office had got control of himself, seeing the danger to his place of business so quickly ended; he spoke sharply, authoritatively. "Go somewhere else to pick your fights—I won't allow it here!"

ONE OF the Yorks turned on him, with a snarl of baffled rage. "That so, Bogart? You just wait, mister! We'll settle our score with Diamond Wheel one of these days; and then, you better look out that we don't start in on you—you money-grubbing crook!"

Bogart met their threatening looks without any evidence of fear. He had no gun showing; he stood there with thumbs hooked into the pockets of a pearl-gray waistcoat, looking down his nose at the Yorks. Then, with a jerk of his head he said curtly: "Put 'em out of here, Grady!"

The one who had followed him from the office stepped forward, with a gun ready. During this exchange he had been standing behind his boss, eyeing Reasoner in a way that told the latter his recognition of this man had been mutual. Grady Franks was the name Reasoner had known him by; apparently he went by the same one here. Now he tore his stare away from the newcomer and stepped forward to turn his gun on the Yorks.

"You heard the boss!" he growled. "Beat it!"

Crib York was moaning and rocking his wounded arm against him, blood dripping through his fingers and onto the sawdust-littered floor. He lifted eyes that were blind with pain, to search wildly about him. "Who did it?" he choked out. "Where's the skunk bullet-blasted my gunarm? Damn him, I'll—"

But then Crib's brothers had him, one on either side, and under the menace of a pair of drawn guns they got him turned and headed, staggering, for the side door. Just as they reached it, however, one of the unhurt pair paused to twist about and lay a final, hate-filled stare on Jim Reasoner—as though memorizing the stranger's face, setting it firmly in his mind. A moment later the three of them were gone, the door slamming shut behind them.

Only after that did Reasoner shove his gun into leather.

CHAPTER II

NOW, ON THE tail of this business that had ended so abruptly with the firing of a single shot, men who had fled the saloon began crowding back inside again. Noisy excitement filled the Seven-Up. Jim Reasoner saw curious and respectful glances directed his way, yet he noticed a certain restraint in them.

It occurred to him suddenly that none of these men were particularly pleased over his saving of the Diamond Wheel men. Sentiment was so strong against Shapley and his foreman that the crowd would likely have stood by and let them be murdered by the Yorks without making any effort to prevent it. This was a sobering reflection, and one he did not like.

Then Matt Harbin had him by the arm and was dragging him over to meet his boss—the dignified, white-haired man at the bar. "This is him, Walt! This is the man I sent for—I told you, didn't I, he'd more'n earn his pay?"

Walt Shapley looked at the

stranger. He had a direct look about him, and a quiet dignity; he had, too, the indefinable air of one who has borne great burdens and survived tragic losses. He said, in a deeply resonant and cultured voice: "You've more than earned it already, Mr. Reasoner. If you hadn't stepped through that door the moment you did, we might not be here talking to you now!"

Reasoner shrugged, a faint embarrassment settling on him. "Matt may have exaggerated a little, telling you about me. Anyhow, I came—soon as his wire reached me. I hope I can be of some help, if you're really in trouble as bad as he hinted at."

"It's bad enough!" said Harbin, grimly. "What you just seen ought to—"

They were interrupted, then, as the saloon owner descended on them, smiling broadly. "The name's Sim Bogart," he told Reasoner. "Mister, I ought to thank you for ending that scene before it got out of control! It wouldn't take but a little wild shooting to smash this building out of repair."

Reasoner looked at him coolly. "It was hardly the reason I butted in," he said.

"Oh, of course." Bogart had colored a little; the toothy smile lost a little of its charm. "Naturally, a repair bill isn't to be compared with the loss of a man's life." He turned to the Diamond Wheel owner. "I'm sorry about the whole thing, Shapley. We all probably need a drink. On the house—naturally."

The white-haired man nodded his thanks. As they turned to the bar, Sim Bogart beckoned to a man who stood a little apart. It was the man Jim Reasoner had already spotted, and recognized. He came over, with plain reluctance. Greenish eyes scowled at Reasoner from below a shelf of heavy brow; a massive jaw, that was twisted a little as though it might have been broken once and not mended properly, was shot forward.

Sim Bogart said, "This is my manager—he runs the Seven-Up for me while I give my time to larger matters. Grady Franks..."

"We've met," said Reasoner.

The saloon man showed surprise, and looked at Franks for confirmation. The latter nodded, shortly.

"That's right," he grunted, and his heavy jaw clamped shut again. Neither of the two offered to shake hands; it was as though a sudden, undefined hostility had leaped into being, between them. It didn't miss the notice of the others, who looked on in puzzlement and some alarm.

To break the silence, Bogart laughed awkwardly and said, "Well, and how about that drink?"

"You don't need to count me!" said Reasoner, coldly, and not taking his stare from Franks' ugly, battered face. "I won't drink with this man!"

Someone might have pressed a button and emptied a high electric voltage into the air about that knot of men. Someone vented a startled gasp. Sim Bogart's clean-shaven mien lost expression for an instant; gradually a look of shocked bewilderment built upon it.

GRADY FRANKS, himself, showed no change except that his scowl grew even blacker, his craggy jaw shot further forward. He stood there with elbows bent, blunt-fingered hands spread wide—the right one, not far from the rubber-buffed gun that rode his thigh.

Then Sim Bogart found his voice. "I think you'd better explain yourself, fellow!" His beady eyes were hard against Reasoner's dark face: he wasn't smiling now.

"When I knew Grady Franks he was the sneakiest running iron artist on the San Saba. He was also the loudest talker and the worst-smelling yellow-livered coward." Reasoner shook his head. "Liquor wouldn't taste right, drunk with that kind of an hombre!"

Bogart, his eyes widening, turned on the other man. "Hey, Franks! What do you say to this?"

Murder was in the accused man's look. His barrel chest lifted under the dirty flannel shirt, his nostrils flaring spasmodically; the fingers of that splayed right hand twitched. He gritted: "The man's a filthy liar!"

For answer, Jim Reasoner's left arm shot forward and the solid smack of his open palm striking the other's face splatted sharply. The blow rocked Franks, left its white imprint on his cheek to turn quickly red. Then, as Reasoner dropped his arm again, waiting, a tide of angry color poured up into the man's face until even his forehead glowed.

Yet still Grady Franks made no move, though his tightened lips worked with the same wicked inner impulse.

Reasoner's mouth quirked. "That should prove the part about the yellow liver. The rest of it I'll let you decide for yourselves!" He turned to the staring Diamond Wheel men. "This likely cancels my welcome in the Seven-Up. If you're ready to go, I'd as soon!"

A helpless look passed between Walt Shapley and his foreman. The latter put up a hand to scratch the back of his sunburned, deep-scored neck—and the hand was *not* too steady. "Mebbyso we better, and let this end here! We'll take a rain check on that drink, Bogart—assuming the offer's still good."

Sim Bogart said nothing. His look was indecipherable; it might have been astonishment, at a shocking revelation concerning one he had trusted—but it might equally as well have been an anger so towering that it left him, for the moment, speechless and beyond movement. As for Grady Franks, he was plainly in the grip of helpless fury. He wanted to grab for the gun at his belt, but with Jim Reasoner's cold eyes boring into his own he simply didn't dare.

Then, deliberately, Jim Reasoner turned his back, strode directly but unhurriedly to the batwing doors and shouldered through them. And no sound came from the humiliated Grady Franks to call him back.

As he halted to drag in a lungful of clean air, untainted by liquor fumes and stale tobacco smoke, the green half-doors swung again and someone stepped out close behind him. Reasoner turned, thinking it would be Walt Shapley or his old

friend, Matt Harbin, joining him; but it wasn't.

He looked into pinched and narrow features, under a thatch of drab and lifeless hair—one still young whom something, illness seemingly, had aged and ravaged beyond his years. He was no cowman. He wore a sack suit, low oxfords, a white shirt and string tie. Looking at the hollow chest of the man, the shoulders rounded as if it might have been by incessant coughing, Reasoner quickly tabbed the stranger: *A lunger.*

CONFIRMING his hunch, the man coughed—a rheumy, hacking sound that made Reasoner's own chest hurt as he saw the way it shook the other and doubled him over with its torment. He overcame the spasm, with an effort, and his mouth twisted in a dead smile.

"Sorry!" he murmured. "It's a nuisance, but I can't help myself... I wanted to congratulate you. I saw what you did to that no-good Grady Franks. It looks as though my father had at last found something to change his luck."

"Your father?"

"Stepfather, I ought to have said. Tremont is the name—Paul Tremont. Your employer, Shapley, happens to have been my mother's second husband..."

The Diamond Wheel owner himself stepped out upon the saloon veranda just then, Matt Harbin trailing him. Walt Shapley said, "So you've met the boy?"

"I introduced myself," Tremont told his stepfather. "I got word of what was happening between you and the Yorks and hurried over from my office; got here just in time to see Grady Franks put in his place."

"Grady Franks!" Old Matt Harbin shook his head. "Jim, I thought you were sure courting suicide, talking up to Bogart's gunslinger that way! He has a terrific reputation hereabouts."

"Had one, you mean," young Tremont supplied. "There's nothing left of it, since Reasoner's finished with him." He added, "What about that drink you didn't get just now?"

There's a bottle of decent stuff in my desk. I'd like the three of you to join me—sort of a toast to the promise of a brighter future."

Reasoner looked at his new boss, sensing a brief and reluctant hesitation. But then Walt Shapley said, "Why, I suppose there's time for a short one..."

So it was that the four went downstreet a half block, to Tremont's office. This occupied a dingy room above a store building, at the head of dark and creaking stairs. A cheap desk, a few chairs, a case of heavy leather-bound volumes, were its only furnishings, and a connecting door opened onto a second room which was his living quarters. Letters painted on the pebbled glass of the stairway door said, briefly, "P. TREMONT, ATTORNEY."

The consumptive produced a bottle and four glasses from a drawer of his desk, and they had their drink. Good whiskey, all right; Reasoner emptied his glass solemnly, enjoying the taste of it.

Matt Harbin tossed off his drink, ran a sleeve across his mouth. "Thanks!" he grunted. "That beats the poison at the Seven-Up, by a long way. Now, me and the boss have got business to tend to. That right, Walt?"

"Yes," said the whitehaired rancher. "A lot of things to see to, before the wagon goes out Monday morning. And I want to be back at the ranch by dark. Could you meet us at the livery in about an hour, Reasoner, ready to head for Diamond Wheel?"

"What about the Yorks?"

"Oh, they won't be bothering us again—not right away," Matt Harbin opined. "They'll have their hands too full holding Crib down while the doc works on him."

"All right, then," said Reasoner. "I'd like the chance to get better acquainted with Tremont, here..."

WHEN THE door closed behind the two older men, Paul Tremont offered his visitor a chair and another drink from the bottle. Reasoner took it but declined a third shot, with thanks. "My limit!"

The other man had no limit, seemingly. He dropped into the barrel chair; hunched forward across the desk, he filled his own glass again and again, throwing the whiskey into his throat and making a face over it each time. But the drinking only punctuated the talk.

"So," he said, his lifeless eyes on the visitor. "You're the man who's going to save Diamond Wheel?"

Reasoner shrugged. "I'd hardly say that. Matt Harbin is an old friend of mine; he got word to me that he was rodding a trouble ranch and needed help. Naturally, it pleased me to do anything I could."

He got out Bull Durham sack and papers, began fashioning a smoke. Tremont, he noticed, followed the movement of his lean brown hands as though fascinated by their precise deftness of motion. Suddenly, Tremont demanded, "Can you prove what you said about Grady Franks being a crook? Could you make it stand in court?"

There was an intent eagerness in his voice that brought him Reasoner's curious glance.

"What makes you ask? Interested from the legal standpoint? Actually," he went on, "I couldn't prove any charge against the man. It was common knowledge, on the San Saba, but that's a considerable distance from here. I was some surprised to run across him, this far north—and surprised, too, that a gent like Bogart would pick him as a manager for his business."

"Manager!" Tremont made a sour face at his empty glass. "A fancy name to cover his real job. He's Sim Bogart's bodyguard. Sim's got need for one, as many enemies as he's made himself with his sharp dealings."

"The Yorks were none too friendly toward him, I noticed. They said they'd take him on after Diamond Wheel was taken care of. What's their grievance against Bogart?"

The lawyer said, "Why, he skinned them out of a lot of money, once. He's a land and cattle dealer, on the side. He sold the Yorks their Rocking Y, and they found out too

late that it's worthless land, that goes dry every summer. Naturally, they ain't forgiving him for putting it over on them."

"I see..."

Tremont was seized by a sharp, brief spell of coughing, just then. He sat there, shoulders hunched and shaking, as he fumbled blindly into a pocket and brought out a handkerchief which he clamped against his bloodless lips.

Sweat stood on his forehead when the siege was finished; he used the handkerchief to wipe it away, and returned the cloth to his coat pocket. From his movements, Reasoner knew that the man was showing the effects of the liquor he'd consumed—nearly half the bottle, now, had been poured into him. His dull eyes had a glassy brightness.

WAS IT his broken health that drove him to this kind of drinking? Or was it something else—some desperate, inner conflict?

On a hunch Reasoner said, "Tell me if I'm wrong. But I'm thinking you wanted to know what I had on Grady Franks for purely personal reasons. I'm thinking you've got some score you would like to settle with Bogart—and, that you haven't the nerve to try it as long as Franks is around to protect him!"

Tremont's head snapped up; his eye found Reasoner's and he glared, with the sudden rage of a man whose private thoughts had been treacherously laid bare. "Why, hang you—"

Unhurriedly, Jim Reasoner eased to his feet. "I was just supposing... Now," he added, "maybe I better be getting along before this talk of ours goes sour."

The consumptive still glared, wordless. Reasoner turned and walked unhurriedly to the door, put his hand upon the knob. But then a sound made him turn. Tremont was laughing horribly, with a drunken mirth that shook him as the cough had done a moment before. Reasoner stood and watched until the man was quite finished, and sat hunched there behind the desk, sodden and spent by the effort. The nearly empty bottle had overturned and lay

on its side, dripping a slow stream of amber liquor down the side of the desk to the barren floor.

At last Jim Reasoner said, "Well, where's the joke?"

The eyes that met his own held no humor, only a kind of sardonic bitterness. "The joke? Why, it's on you, friend. You boasted there was one thing no man could make you do—and here I've gone and had you doing it!"

"And that was—?"

"To drink," answered Tremont, heavily, "with a hopeless, yellow-livered coward..."

CHAPTER III

THE CLOSING of the door shut away sight of the man; but, standing there in semi-darkness at the head of the enclosed stairwell, Jim Reasoner found himself bothered by thought of Tremont's desperate, haunted eyes, of the gaunt body worn by disease—the obscure tragedy of a wasted life, of a man broken and dying perhaps, and hastening the end with solitary bouts of drinking in this squalid cowtown law office.

Paul Tremont's story, he knew without quite knowing how, was one that would need further attention. After all, the man was Walt Shapley's stepson, and so his fate was linked—in some fashion at any rate—with that of Diamond Wheel. And there was something eating at the man, a dark and festering secret that was having its way with him. Something, Reasoner had already guessed, that must be connected with the saloon owner, Sim Bogart...

He dropped down the creaking staircase, slowly, his thoughts working at the scene he had just quitted. He stepped out of the dim hallway, into the full flood of late sunlight that lay upon the dusty street.

The blow came without warning, catching him unawares and smashing hard against the side of his head. Jim Reasoner staggered, slammed against the edge of the shadowed door; he whirled, fighting to regain

balance and get around to see what had struck him. At the same moment he felt a quick tug at his waist as the belt gun was jerked from its holster, disarming him.

He saw his assailants, then. Two of them—the other pair of Yorks, Dale and Ollie. They must have learned he was in Tremont's office and been laying for him at the bottom of the stairs. Now, with wolfish snarls, they threw themselves upon him.

The clubbing weight of a heavy fist struck him in the chest before he had any chance to prepare for it, and Reasoner went back and down, falling heavily to the planks of the sidewalk. He heard one of the brothers roaring, "Ruin Crib's gunarm, will you?"

The planks shook to the thud of heavy boots and he rolled aside, barely in time. A solid rawhide heel scraped the side of his head and smashed hard, precisely where his face had been a second before.

They meant to kill him—to break him apart, with the sheer animal lust to hurt and smash. The knowledge woke in him a responding impulse, seldom conscious before. The hurt of his body, and the cowardliness of their combined attack, brought a fury welling up to the surface; a red bloom of rage exploded somewhere behind his eyes. He completed his sideward roll, bunched legs under him and came driving up to hurl himself bodily against the one who had tried to stomp his brains into the boardwalk.

The second York squawked warning: "Watch it, Ollie!" But Ollie York was caught off balance by his unfinished stride and as Reasoner's hurtling shape struck him he spilled down, a bellow of rage breaking from him, his arms windmilling wildly.

It was no time for rules or decent fighting. Reasoner swung a boot and the toe of it clipped hard against Ollie's skull, behind the ear. The man went limp; and then Reasoner was spinning to meet Dale's bear-like rush.

A fist brushed him, ripping the

shirt across his chest. Reasoner swung wildly. His fist struck flesh that was as firm and hard as plated rubber, and which seemed to feel pain about as readily. And then a direct hit slammed like the strike of a maul and he went spinning clear around, his body feeling as though a hole must have been driven right through it.

Dimly, through a buzzing in his ears, he was aware of shouting voices, of one especially that kept screaming, over and over again, in a high, hysterical screech: "Fight! Fight!" A crowd was gathering, forming with startling abruptness—from nowhere seemingly, the way that crowds have of doing.

But the front ranks of the spectators split apart and scattered, yelping, in their haste to avoid Jim Reasoner's hurtling body as he staggered before the slam of Dale York's sledging fist. He went to one knee, in a slithering sprawl; yellow dust ballooned up about him. Through it, he saw the black shape of the giant looming, coming after him.

WITH ONE hand against the ground he managed, stunned as he was, to push to his feet. And since there was no chance to retreat, he lunged drunkenly forward to meet his enemy, head lowered.

His head struck York squarely in the chest and rammed him backward, but at the cost of a neck-jolting jar that felt as though his spine had surely snapped. Dale York backpedalled; his heel struck the edge of the boardwalk and that nearly tripped him up, but with a wild rotation of his thick arms he got his balance.

And yonder, Reasoner caught a glimpse of big Ollie stirring and sitting up, shaking his head. He was still dizzy from Reasoner's kick but his skull was too thick for it to lay him out long. Panic touched Reasoner. What chance had he against two indestructible adversaries like the York brothers?

Doggedly, he waded in, knowing if he didn't manage somehow to dispose of Dale before Ollie fully recovered and got his feet under him, the fight

had only one possible way of ending. Dale York was ready and swung a solid right; he blocked it against a shoulder, and then drove his own fist into the center of the bearded, brutish features.

He felt the sharp pain as his knuckle struck the edge of a tooth, but the tooth gave. Blood spurted from Ollie's smashed mouth and he vented a bubbling roar of fury. Reasoner managed to hit him again, against the side of the corded, pillar-like neck. Then, however, a blow came that he wasn't able to duck, and it slammed him back and his hips struck the springy length of a hitch pole that flanked the street at that point.

With a roar, seeing him trapped there, Dale charged. Desperately, Reasoner braced himself and waited; and as the big man unleashed a looping right from the shoulder, to finish him, he ducked and went in under it, and drove a fist straight at the man's middle, just above the knot in the length of rope he used to hold his dirty jeans in place.

It seemed to sink right in. An agonized whoosh of spent breath came from Dale's bloody, bearded lips and he started to double forward, retching. And Jim Reasoner, reaching with both hands, caught the giant about the neck and dragged his head down; holding him like that, he drove his bent knee upward against the heavy jaw, twice. Dale York's body lost all its stiffening. Reasoner let go of him and the man folded up and dropped, ponderously, to a huddle at his feet.

Suddenly shaky, Reasoner leaned back for support against the hitch rail and stared about him, panting with the exertion. Sweat and dangling hair were in his eyes; he lifted an arm to sleeve them clear, and the movement took a great effort.

The struggle had been short, but punishing. His face and body were sore in a dozen places; his hands were already swelling and he flexed them, grimacing at the pain. His neck felt as though it had been unhinged. But both the Yorks were at his feet, and yonder he saw his gun where they

had tossed it. He moved over, his knees wobbling, and got it; turned its muzzle on Ollie York who looked most apt to give him trouble.

"Stay right where you are!" he warned, sharply. "I'll not take much more from you no-goods..."

A COMMOTION in the circle of spectators brought his head around in time to see an avenging fury descending upon him, in the small figure of Annie York. With flashing legs and wildly flying hair she came through the ranks of the men, young voice lifted in rage. She had a leather quirt in one small hand and she swung it, brought the thongs down hard across the forearm Reasoner flung up to protect his face. Before she could strike again he had trapped her firm, brown wrist in hard fingers.

"You little hell-cat!" he gritted.

Cheeks crimson, eyes flashing, she tried to tear loose from his grip. She kicked at him, striking with her unhampered fist. She was strong, but no match for him. Reasoner jerked her close, trapping her struggling body against his own. He forced her arm down behind her and with a quick wrench at her wrist made her open her fingers and drop the quirt into the dust. He had hurt her; a gasp of pain broke from her lips.

"Now, cut it out!" he grunted. "Be good and I'll turn you loose!"

Through her thin dress he could feel the softness of her body clamped against his own; under his encircling arm her breast swelled with panted breathing. But she had stopped struggling and he released her, pushed her away. She stood facing him, nursing the wrist he had hurt, glaring her hatred from eyes which, he saw now, were the bluest he had ever seen.

She was as pretty as he'd thought she would be, seeing her for the fleeting moment when she passed the barber shop. Her brown skin was firm, flawless, her features delicately shaped. Her body was slight but perfectly formed.

"I'm sorry," Jim Reasoner said, curtly. "I didn't mean to rough you

up, but you asked for it. So did these worthless brothers of yours!"

He wagged his gunbarrel at the men hunkered in the dirt. "They jumped me from behind—the pair of them. You better keep them away from me after this or, next time, I'm liable to kill them!"

"You smashed Crib's arm!" she flared at him. "I wish they'd torn you apart! I wish—"

He shrugged. "Save your breath!"

He was tired, and sore, and angry. Turning his back on Annie York, he leaned and got his old Stetson, where it had fallen into the gutter, and slapped the dirt out of it against his leg. Then, not looking again at the girl or at her brothers, he strode away from there, shouldering through the gaping, grinning mob of onlookers.

They made way for him hastily, and Reasoner started along the board walk, heading for the public livery.

Someone said, "You did a good job with that pair!"

Reasoner halted, turning quickly. He saw the man, then—motionless, in the shadow of a doorway; a solid-built figure in expensive town clothes that didn't sit too well upon his bulky frame. Reasoner said, briefly, "You were watching?"

Sim Bogart nodded. "I wouldn't have thought any one man could lick both of them. But you should have gone further while you were at it. You should have killed them—instead of leaving them alive, to kill you!"

Remembering what Paul Tremont had had to say about Bogart's own relations with the Yorks, Reasoner gave him a sour look. "That would have fit your plans better, wouldn't it?"

THE SALOON man shrugged. He was smoking a thin cheroot; he picked the weed from his lips, studied the glowing end as he spoke again. And Reasoner had no warning of what was coming.

"How would you like to go to work for me?"

"For you?" He didn't try to hide his surprise. "Doing what?"

"Taking Grady Franks' place. Naturally, he's been fired. A man such as you proved him to be has no place on my payroll!"

"Just what was it bothered you?" Reasoner prompted him, his manner turning sharply cold again. "The being a crook—or a coward?"

"Both," replied the other, blandly. "What good to me is a man I can't trust? Especially, when he breaks as easy as you broke Grady Franks..."

Reasoner smiled thinly. "I thought it was something like that. In other words, what you want in a 'manager' is a glorified bouncer and body-guard." He shook his head. "Sorry, Bogart! I've got a job, already. One that I think will suit me a lot better!"

The cheroot was returned to the flat, unsmiling lips. "No harm asking," Sim Bogart grunted. And walked away.

But, moving on toward the livery barn, Jim Reasoner found himself asking: *Now, what was behind that? Would he have put me on his payroll just to have me where he could keep an eye on me?*

He knew the matter of Grady Franks was far from settled. He didn't believe for a minute that Bogart had really given the man his walking papers. Grady could be too useful to someone like Bogart, in a hundred ways.

Reasoner decided to shelve this little conversation, for future reference.

Ten minutes or so after Reasoner arrived at the livery barn, Walt Shapley and his foreman showed up there ready to start the ride to Diamond Wheel. Matt Harbin took one look at his friend's bruised features and shook his head. "It's true, then! The whole town's talking about what happened to the Yorks. I didn't hardly believe it!"

Reasoner had been thinking of Annie York and he was in a sour mood. "I'd rather not talk about it!" he grunted.

They got their horses and took the wagon trail that snaked northward from Rimrock town, across rolling miles of sage and sun-seared bunch

grass range, with the shining coils of the river looping off to their right. It was the first chance there'd been to discuss the situation with his new bosses, and they made serious talk as they rode.

The picture that began to take form was much as he had already pieced it together for himself—a picture of a ranch hated and suspected by its neighbors, and driven in desperation to send for help from a trusted and gunhandy friend of its foreman's earlier days.

Reasoner studied the Easterner, Walt Shapley, trying to form an opinion of the man. He seemed honest, and anxious for peace with his neighbors; but he was plainly an alien to this land and its ways, and largely dependent upon the judgments of his seasoned ramrod. This raised questions in Reasoner's mind, but he saved them pending a chance to talk with his friend, Harbin, alone.

THIS CHANCE came at ranch headquarters, after supper which Shapley ate with his five-man crew in the cook shack behind the main house. Reasoner sauntered out into the mild spring darkness for a smoke and Harbin joined him; they sat on a bench beneath a big cottonwood and looked upon the peaceful scene—hearing the bawling of a calf somewhere out below the valley rim, the lazy voices of the ranch crew getting ready for an evening in town, the sigh of a night breeze through the branches overhead. Lamps gleamed behind windows of main house and bunk shack, and a lantern swayed from a nail about the big barn's double door.

"What's on your mind, Jim?" the older man asked quietly.

"This, for the most part." Leaning, Reasoner picked up a piece of stick and began to trace a design in the dust at their feet, which was faintly illumined by the spread of light from the barn lantern.

He drew four straight lines, crossing at their centers, and a circle enclosing them to form a wheel; outside this, a four-sided figure resting

on one of its points. Harbin watched in silence as Reasoner completed his drawing and tossed aside the stick.

"The Diamond Wheel," said Reasoner. "I'd like to know how any honest cattlemen could pick so clumsy and dangerous a brand—and why you, Matt, haven't made Shapley change it."

Harbin said, "I thought you'd get around to that. Fact is, Jim, this Shapley is a stubborn gent. His wife suggested the design to him—said she figured it was one no rusler could change into anything else. I'll admit she was danged right about *that*, though neither she nor Walt could savvy that their neighbors were apt to get a different idea about it. Now, all the argument in the world won't convince Walt that he ought to change his brand—especially not since his wife died, not long after that, of consumption."

"She was the mother of young Tremont?"

"That's right—by her first husband. The youngster inherited weak lungs from her and came West some five years back. She should have done the same thing, long before, but Shapley was tied to his business interests in the East and she wouldn't leave him. Finally when the docs said it was head for a better climate or else, Shapley sold out everything, converted into cash and brought her here.

"That was two years ago. Naturally enough, they came to the place where her son was already established. They was green as anything, and at first they fell into the hands of this Sim Bogart and almost let him sucker them into buying a worthless piece of land that didn't have any summer water."

"The York place?" Reasoner suggested.

"Why, yes—come to think of it, he did unload it onto the Yorks, later on, when the Shapley's refused to bite. I take it you must have been doing a little digging into local history, on your own?"

"I nosed around some," the other admitted. "Mostly talking with Tremont."

"Well, I'm glad to say it was me saved Shapley from Bogart. About that time, I'd met up with Walt, and he had the sense to realize it would take somebody with savvy to get a greenhorn like him set up in the ranching business. He made me foreman, and has followed my advice every step of the way, since—except for this one thing."

HIS SET his scuffed boot toe on the design Reasoner had scratched into the dirt.

"Because his dead wife suggested that brand, there ain't a chance in the world of making him change it no matter how much trouble it causes him. I tried hard enough! Finally, seeing the way matters were drifting, I done the only thing I could think of. I sent for you!"

"Well," said Reasoner, soberly, "I hope I can do some good."

"You've done a lot, already. That business at the Seven-Up today—"

Reasoner had another question, touching a matter that held a strange interest for him. "This Tremont. How do things stand between him and his step-father?"

There was a moment before the other answered. Then he shook his head a little. "It's kind of sad. The old man hasn't any kinfolk; nobody to leave his money and his ranch to—except for that boy. He feels strongly about young Tremont—couldn't think any more highly of him if they'd been flesh and blood. And yet, they see very little of each other. Paul keeps to that ratty law office of his, hasn't been here to the ranch more'n twice or three times that I can remember. And Walt is breaking his heart over the lad, though he never talks about it. I know him so well, I can read a lot in his mind that doesn't get said."

"Maybe I can make a guess as to their differences."

"Yeah, maybe you can. The likker! It's gonna kill the lad, if the bugs don't get him first. But there don't seem any way to make him lay off. Probably, the shape he's in, he don't figure it's much use..."

The old cowman shoved to his

feet. "Well, I'm hittin' the hay. Lot of work tomorrow, getting ready for the big job next week. Take it easy, fellow."

"Same to you."

Reasoner stayed where he was, busy with his thoughts, as the other walked away.

CHAPTER IV

AT DAWN of Monday, Diamond Wheel sent out its round-up wagon. Spring branding was a cooperative venture, in the Rimrock country. On this side of the river which split the valley grass in half, Walt Shapley's five man crew together with Lewt Bregman and one or two other outfits worked the northern end, from Alkali Wells as far as the boundary of his grass with that of the York Rocking Y. The Yorks and a couple of smaller brands to the south supplied another wagon and crew for the lower half of the range, down to where it played out into the badlands.

Matt Harbin explained to Reasoner, "I'm glad it works out this way. I wouldn't want to count on the Yorks for a hell of a lot, even if we was friendly. Them shirt tail neighbors of theirs are a hard drinkin' bunch and when they get out with a wagon there's blame little work done."

"Anyhow, since our stock don't tend to wander much onto that gaunted graze, us north valley men can generally get our tallying and branding finished in short order and not have to worry about what they do with their half of the job!"

Round-up was too strenuous for a man of Walt Shapley's age and he was to remain at home, holding down the ranch headquarters. At gray dawn of Monday, Diamond Wheel headquarters was astir with activity—punchers saddling up and hazing their chosen remounts into the cavy, the cook overseeing the last-minute details of getting supplies and bedrolls stowed in the chuck wagon.

About the time a red sun tipped the eastern hills, sending its rays

slanting through a bank of clouds piled there, Lewt Bregman and a couple of men came jingling in, ready to join the wagon. There was a certain stiffness in the Circle Dot owner as he greeted the Diamond Wheel crew; and when he caught sight of Reasoner standing beside his saddled bronc rolling an early-morning cigarette, Bregman's thin face drew into a scowl.

"Are you the gent that broke Crib York?" he grunted. "Hell, if I ain't mistaken we've met somewhere—"

"Right," said Jim. "Saturday. In the barber shop. The Yorks rode by."

"Oh, yeah. And I seem to remember suggesting you steer clear of them. You don't take advice very well, do you?"

Reasoner said, "Only when I like it."

Matt Harbin came over to them. "I guess we'll pull out," he said. "The boys from Clawhammer ain't showed up but they can join us on the range. We'll swing north to the Wells, and start working south. Agreeable with you, Lewt?"

"I reckon so."

Bregman seemed indifferent. Reasoner knew he was here for one thing and one thing only—to keep an eye on the interests of Lewt Bregman, with a ready and quick suspicion of the company he was with. And those suspicions seemed centered strongly around the newcomer to the Diamond Wheel crew. Looking at Reasoner, he said, "You actually going to work cattle with us?"

The other shook his head, smiling a little into the Circle Dot owner's dark face. "Not actually. Just figure to take a look at the country, and see how the beef count runs."

"I thought as much," Bregman grunted. "You don't look like no forty-a-month cow rangler, to me..."

He flicked a dark glance at the gunharness strapped to Reasoner's waist, and turned away. Lighting up the cigarette, Reasoner looked after him.

This Bregman, though unimpressive to look at, was worth watching. He was a man of considerable cold

nerve, apparently; he knew what Reasoner was, and yet he showed no temerity about talking up to him and risking his anger—even though he himself showed little sign of being handy with a gun. He was, on the contrary, a slow moving sort of man. But plainly a deep one.

Shortly after this, the round-up wagon rolled out, slanting north and west across the bunch grass. Red rays of the early sun struck gleams of light from the metal of harness buckles, from the belt cartridges and spurs and saddle trappings of the riders who accompanied it. From the first swell, Jim Reasoner looked back at the ranch layout nestling in its hollow, and then ran an eye across the face of the morning.

FRESH, with a heavy dew sparkling on the sage. Westward lifted the rimrock, tawny and barren and broken by erosion; beyond this abrupt wall, the first range of foothills piled up to the peaks beyond.

The first holding ground had already been chosen and they left the slow-moving chuck wagon to head for it and make camp, while the riders struck directly for Alkali Wells. They reached the place by midmorning, and found Clawhammer's contingent waiting for them—a big, towheaded cowman named Joe Sedgwick and three others, one a fuzz-faced youngster who was Sedgwick's oldest boy, making a hand at his first round-up and highly excited about it. Stories about Jim Reasoner had reached the kid, too, and he eyed this stranger with mingled expressions of hostility and awe.

Matt Harbin organized the work, dividing the riders into pairs and assigning them territories to sweep over and chouse every beef critter they found toward the first collecting ground for counting and branding. He and Reasoner worked together so that the latter would have a chance to ask any questions that occurred to him.

It was a spell since Reasoner had done range work, and it was good to have a rope in his hand again and a wise cowpony between his knees,

darting after the boogery steers and turning them back when they tried to escape into the brush. Mostly Clawhammer stuff, at this north end of the range, but they ran into an occasional Diamond Wheel steer among the rest.

When for the first time he saw Shapley's clumsy brand burnt on cowhide, Reasoner shook his head in disapproval. It was hardly readable—a mass of scar tissue, with its many strokes running into one another and blurring in confusion.

He didn't say anything to Matt Harbin, since he already knew the old cowman's feelings on the subject. If Shapley clung with stubborn insistence to such a suspicious and unwieldy design, there apparently was nothing anyone could do about it.

They were close under the flank of the valley wall here—the barren rimrock, porous with eroded cracks that gave access to timbered foothills beyond. Jim Reasoner asked his friend, "Any of our stock apt to straggle up into those breaks, Matt?"

Harbin said it wasn't likely. "We used to comb that rimrock country pretty carefully, just to make sure; but we never found enough beef strayed in there to make it worth the trouble. No water, little grass—nothing to lure 'em up off the bottoms. Way back in the hills, beyond the rim, there are a few pockets of meadow but they're pretty scattered and hard to get to—not even much use for summer range."

The work of the round-up progressed. Cattle spilled in a red tide down through the brushy coulees to the holding ground. A tawny dust cloud lifted above the milling gather, and the lowing voice of the herd—the anxious bawling of cows momentarily separated from their calves. The sun tilted higher into the sky, showed greasily behind the drifting dust in the air. Riders came in to the chuck wagon, had a quick bait of beans and bread and coffee from the big, smoke-blackened pot the cook kept stewing over a bed of coals, and then rode out again.

TWO RIDERS held the growing herd until that section of the range should have been combed and the last stragglers thrown onto the holding grounds; then would come the job of taking count and of branding, earmarking, and castrating the increase. After that, move the wagon to a new holding ground and begin the process again, swinging gradually southward until their half of the range had been covered.

Such was spring round-up—a two-week job, full of hard riding and tough, dawn-to-dark labor. Still, after the dull monotony of winter, a cattleman was apt to look on it as a welcome release of energy. And there was a special relaxation in evenings spent about a campfire, when a man got to know his neighbors and renewed his own compact with the life of the earth.

Only, there was not much camaraderie here, between Diamond Wheel men and the other cattlemen of the Rimrock country. Little was said, beyond what was needed in the course of the work. Lewt Bregman, in particular, fell into a sullen silence that grew deeper as the days dragged out.

Once, Jim Reasoner watched Harbin talking to the Circle Dot owner about some matter or other and observed Bregman's curt reply. When the man shrugged finally and walked away, Reasoner nudged his bronc over beside his friend. Taking the cigarette from between his lips to reshape it and fasten the brown paper more securely, he observed, "Really got a burr under his tail about something, hasn't he?"

Matt Harbin was scowling after the man's retreating back. "His Circle Dot tallies are running short—way below the normal losses from winter kill. Of course, he's been loudmouthing for a long time now that somebody was after his cattle, but this is the first evidence I've seen that there might be something behind his talk!"

"What about Diamond Wheel?"

Harbin shook his head. "Nothing wrong there. We're running about as I had expected, maybe even a little

better. Too good, in fact, to suit Bregman. He's in a mood to be suspicious, and he can't quite stomach our showing a full count when he's figuring losses.

"Well," he added bleakly, "all I know for sure is that no Shapley rider has been putting our brand on anything that don't belong to us—and if we ain't been doing it, it's a cinch nobody else would!"

One of the riders just then put up a yell of, "Stray, here!"

He came spurring away from the herd, hazing a white-face toward the boss of the round-up for his inspection. It was seldom that a foreign brand turned up in the gather, since the valley's steep walls tended to isolate it from stock drifting in from outside. This steer, however, wore a Leaning H brand. Matt Harbin looked at it for some moments, in obvious puzzlement.

"Anybody know that iron?" he demanded. "It's new to me."

A knot of riders had formed. Joe Sedgwick, frowning, said, "Wait a minute! If I'm not mistaken there's a Leaning H registered by some Eastern syndicate that owns a spread up at the far northern end of the Territory."

"Now, how in blazes would it turn up here?" Harbin exchanged a look with the others, got head shakes and the shrugging of shoulders for answer. He was looking directly at Lewt Bregman, then, as he made his decision. "Vent the brand and run a Circle Dot on it. I'll send them a check for the critter."

A SLOW flush crept up into the face of the Circle Dot owner. His mouth shaped words and then, leaving them unspoken, he heeled about and strode away. Jim Reasoner, watching, had to smile lightly to himself at the small thrust his friend had scored against the suspicious Bregman. Not that it would make any difference, in the long run.

Later, when Reasoner had time to put some thought to that strange steer and the question of how it had come to be among the herds of the Rimrock ranchers, he discovered

something that was as puzzling as it was disconcerting. A few additional strokes with a running iron would very easily convert that syndicate-owned Leaning H burn into a Diamond Wheel. Possibly just a coincidence, of course, since there were a raft of other imaginable brands that Shapley's complicated design could be made to cover. Still, it gave him a new direction for his thoughts—though he wasn't exactly certain where it led him....

Toward the middle of the week, his supply of smoking tobacco having run short on him and there being a couple of items also that the cook was in need of, Reasoner took the opportunity for a solitary ride into town. Especially, he wanted to stop off at the ranch on the way to see how Walt Shapley was making out. The big house and its surrounding barn and outbuildings and corrals looked very lonely and deserted as he rode in on them, toward the middle of afternoon.

He rode around to the front of the house and saw Shapley seated in a rawhide-bottomed chair where the sun lay warm across the veranda. The old man had a book lying open across his knees but he was not reading; his eyes studied the far sweep of the sage and bunch grass, instead, and the hillock nearby where a low mound and a slab of marble marked the resting place of the woman he loved.

To Jim Reasoner, seeing him like that, the Easterner seemed suddenly a pathetic figure—lonely, aging, almost without friends and lost in a land whose bare harshness was alien to him.

Shapley rose, laying aside his book, and came to the edge of the steps. Obviously, he was glad to see someone. Reasoner dismounted, let his bronc have a drink from the trough, and then walked over and the men set on the steps and talked awhile. His boss wanted to know about the progress of the round-up and he said that it was going according to schedule.

The white-haired man reported that everything had been quiet for

him, batching it alone at the ranch. Quiet, and lonely. Reasoner was a bit relieved to know that the days had passed without disturbance; he had worried, a little, thinking that with the old man here alone he would have been fair game for his enemies if they wanted to dispose of him. Something prompted him to say, "I hope you stick pretty close to the house, and don't show too much light after sundown."

The faded eyes gave him a sharp look. "You think I'm in danger?"

"Well, probably not—if you keep a gun handy and are careful not to let anybody come in close until you're sure of him. All your neighbors have their hands too full with round-up to be apt to make trouble. Even the Yorks—and they were drunk, that day in town, or it likely wouldn't have happened then."

"How do you size up the situation, by now?"

Reasoner said, "I'll know better when the tallies are in. But it looks like someone is running your Diamond Wheel on beef that don't belong to you. Someone, maybe, bent on making trouble between you and your neighbors."

"But why should they want that?" the old man exclaimed.

"That's what I figure I was hired to find out!"

FOR A MOMENT Reasoner debated with himself; then, despite Matt Harbin's warning that it would do no good, he decided he owed it to his boss to try and make him see light on the one thing which was the main cause of his neighbors' suspicions. He said, "The best way you can help yourself, Mr. Shapley, is by adopting a new brand."

The white-thatched head jerked sharply; a cool remoteness came into the oldster's manner. "That's entirely out of the question," he said, stiffly. "I'm an honest man—also, I suppose you could say, a stubborn one. My brand was chosen in good faith and there are personal reasons why I'm not willing to change it. Instead, I mean to prove to everyone, in spite of it, that they've done

me an injustice by suspecting me!"

You mean to make it just this much harder for the men who are trying to help you, Reasoner thought with some irritation, and squeezing out the butt of his cigarette dropped it over the edge of the steps to the ground below. Still, knowing the tragic story behind the old man's seeming stubbornness, he could not hold anger with him.

He stood up. "I'm bound for town," he said, dropping the subject. "I'll pick up your mail. Anything else you need, that I can get for you and drop off on my way back to the wagon?"

Yes, there was an item or two. Reasoner added them to his list and, with a few final remarks, returned to his bronc and lifted to saddle. He was about to rein away when a word from Shapley held him.

The old man stood on the steps in the thin sunlight, frail and alone. He said, hesitantly, "If you see my stepson, you might tell him I'd like to have him drop around sometime for a game of chess. It's a long time since he's been here. Tell him there'll be no—arguments. He'll understand what I mean."

"Sure," Reasoner agreed. "I'll tell him."

"I'd really like to see more than I do of the lad," Shapley went on in a wistful tone. "After all, he's the nearest I have to a flesh-and-blood relative, now, and it seems hardly right to avoid one another the way we have been doing. It's very long since I had a game, too... I don't suppose you play, Mr. Reasoner?"

He gestured and Reasoner, following his look, saw the board and the black and white chess pieces set up, on the porch railing near Shapley's chair. He saw now that the book the old man had been reading when he came up was a collection of chess problems, and Shapley had been working on one of them.

Reasoner shook his head. "Hardly my line," he said. "But if I see Tremont I'll tell him you're honing for a battle...."

He rode away with oddly mingled feelings for the autocratic, stubborn

old man; but mostly he found his feelings were of pity.

CHAPTER V

HE DIDN'T keep to the wagon road, but struck out at a more direct route across the rolling bottom land that was gray with sage, green where the sun ran liquidly upon bunch grass growth, white with the thick dotting of sand lilies. He rode high, where he could put his glance over a wide spread of range toward the distant, shining river. And so it was that he saw the other rider dogging his course, despite an obvious attempt at keeping hidden.

Reasoner pulled in sharply, narrowing down on the point below where he had glimpsed the dark shape of the horseman briefly, crossing an open space before disappearing again into a stand of scrub timber. There was no question about it. The man was trying to flank him; and, if he kept to his present route, he would be dropping from this low ridge at a point where the other would be waiting. Jim Reasoner's mouth settled into a hard line as he spelled out the shape of the thing.

He formed his strategy quickly; then, touching up his sorrel with the spurs, swung aside and went at an angle down the slope directly toward the scrub oaks where the rider had vanished. Buckbrush grew thick at the skirt of the hill and here he dismounted, anchored the reins to a stout bush. He slipped his gun from leather, checked the loads. Then, on foot, Reasoner moved forward through the brush and into the trees.

First, he saw the bronc—a hammerheaded gray, unbranded. It tossed its head and took a couple of nervous, dancing steps away from him as he appeared unexpectedly out of the shadows.

A voice snapped, angrily, "Quiet, you damn crowbait—!"

Beyond the horse, Reasoner discovered a man's figure flattened

against a narrow tree trunk at the timber's edge, where he was in position to command the dropoff of the slope beyond. The man had turned, now, to swear at his mount which seemed likely to betray the ambush; and thus it was that he faced Reasoner, a scant dozen paces away.

He was Grady Franks. His greenish eyes beneath their shelf of black brow held a ludicrous mingling of hatred and surprise. The massive, ill-mended jaw and dropped open a little. It clamped shut suddenly; remembering that he had a sixshooter in his hand, Franks made a frantic effort to bring the gun around into line.

Without haste, Reasoner tripped the trigger of his own weapon. On the crash of the shot the gray squealed its terror, made a lunging backward leap. The knot with which Franks had attempted to fasten its reins gave way. Next instant, the bronc was bolting madly away through the trees.

But the carefully placed bullet had only knocked bark from the tree trunk, an inch or two from Franks' head. It held him motionless, frozen, the gun still slanted at the ground, and a sweat of fear suddenly sheening his ugly face.

"Drop the gun, Grady!" Reasoner snapped. "I've got you dead to rights!"

The stubby fingers opened; the Colt fell from them, thudded into the leaf mold beneath the trees. Reasoner walked forward, his own gun smoking, and picked the weapon up. He looked coldly into the face of his prisoner.

He said, with contempt, "You really are a yellow coward, aren't you, Grady? Is this the best you could think of, to get even for that scene in town the other day?" He added, his voice stinging: "What does it take, anyhow, to make you stand up to a man and have it out with him—in the open?"

Grady Franks was trembling with humiliation and baffled fury. "I'll show you!" he gritted. "Throw away your gun and I'll show you plenty!"

"I wouldn't dirty my hands with you!" Reasoner had pocketed the captured weapon; but he held his own ready, knowing he could count on a murderous trick from this man if he allowed a chance for one. His eyes had turned thoughtful as he studied the ugly, sweaty face.

"I'm wondering, Grady, what you're really doing in this country! You don't look the type a gent like Bogart would hire to run his saloon for him, and on the other hand I don't think you'd have the nerve to deliberately sign on for a dangerous job like bodyguarding a man with a lot of potential enemies. You've got me curious."

"The devil with you!" growled Franks.

Reasoner shrugged. "That's about as intelligent an answer as I expected," he admitted, sourly. "Well, let me tell you something—and I want you to remember it! Sim Bogart says he fired you. Which gives you no further legitimate reason for hanging around."

"If I lay eyes on you again, I'll have to assume you're either breaking out that running iron of yours—or that you're waiting for the chance at me, that you missed just now. And I'll have to act according!"

He pouched his gun. "I've got every reason to kill you where you stand," he said. "Instead, I'll leave that little thought for you to chew on. I've got to get on to town."

Reasoner turned his back and started into the trees. He had gone only a few steps when Grady Franks cried hoarsely, "You settin' me afoot?"

The other looked back. "You set yourself afoot," he pointed out. "Anybody without sense enough to anchor a gun-shy bronc, especially when he's planning an ambush, deserves to do some walking." His mouth tightened in a smile at the black fury on Franks' ugly face. "Oh, don't get discouraged, Grady. With those reins dangling, he's bound to catch them on something if you follow him long enough..."

He could hear the man's frenzied

curses as he walked coolly away through the trees to get his own sorrel, where he had left it.

WITH THE valley outfits on round-up, Rimrock town was an utterly stagnant place when Jim Reasoner rode in, toward late afternoon.

Not a single rig or saddle horse lined any of the hitch rails; the boardwalks were deserted. The barbershop and half the business houses were shuttered, there being not enough trade for their operators to bother keeping them open. Rimrock had crawled into its hole.

Finding a general store open for business, Reasoner tied his sweaty bronc outside and went in to make his purchases. The same somnolent atmosphere hung over the counters, the shelves with their varied goods stacked up and putting a characteristic mingling of odors into the stale air of the building. The storekeeper was glad enough to see someone, and the filling of Reasoner's order was accompanied by a good many questions concerning the round-up's progress. He answered in general terms, and asked, "Anything of interest happen around here this week?"

"Not a blame thing. You could shovel this place under during round-up and nobody'd ever miss it. But wait till the wagons come back in; then for one evening, the old burg really takes off the roof. It's the wildest night in the year!"

Reasoner paid for his own purchases and put the rest on Diamond Wheel's tab; he took the gunny sack the proprietor gave him to carry them in, and shouldering it walked outside to his horse and strapped the sack down behind the saddle. Then he mounted and rode on until he reached the Seven-Up, sitting on its corner with the deep veranda facing two streets.

In all that time he still did not see a moving thing except for a yellow hound dog asleep in a pool of dust in front of the livery stable; and it only flicked its ears a little

at the thud of the sorrel's hoofs in the ruts, passing by.

Entering the saloon, Reasoner saw all the chairs stacked up on the card tables, where they would stay until the valley cowhands came in off the range. Two men were in the big room. A bartender lounged on a stool behind his counter, reading a newspaper; and leaning with one foot hiked up on the brass rail, Paul Tremont had the bar dice and was idly rolling them, click of cubes across velvet and against the backstop making a sporadic run of sound in the stillness. This ceased as the batwings swished shut and Tremont looked up to see who the newcomer was.

The consumptive straightened, turning, holding the dice in one thin hand. "Well!" he exclaimed, drily. "A customer!" Even the bartender was interested enough to put aside his newspaper and hitch ponderously off the stool. Tremont gave the man a jerk of the head. "Set one up for Mr. Reasoner."

"Just a minute! I think it's my turn."

The lawyer shook his head quickly. He indicated a shotglass containing an amber jewel of whiskey, that stood on the counter at his elbow.

"I'm practicing a little discipline on myself," he said, a thin smile twisting pale and bloodless lips. "I've been standing here looking at this drink for—" He shot a look at the banjo clock on the wall above the bar mirror. "—Near twenty minutes now, and haven't touched it yet. That right?" He appealed to the bartender, who uttered a grunt of confirmation. Tremont looked at Reasoner in triumph. "I'm determined I'm going to make it a half hour."

REASONER was somehow uncomfortable at the bald admission of weakness. He said, "Well, I won't bust that up. And I will take the drink. A bottle, too," he added as the bartender turned away to set out a glass for him. "To take along for the boys at camp."

As he lifted the drink, Tremont

reached for the dice again. Their monotonous clicking against the backboard sounded again in the stillness, and Reasoner watched them for a moment after he had set down the empty glass. He said then: "How would you like a game of chess?"

Tremont looked at him. "Now don't tell me you—?"

"Not me. But there's a lonely old man out at Diamond Wheel who's itching for someone to play against. He asked if I'd bring you his invitation."

"You're joking!" Tremont blurted, in a tone of disbelief. "He never said such a thing!"

"Oh, but he did, though," said Reasoner, indifferently. "He said also to tell you there would be no arguments—that you'd understand what he meant by it."

Paul Tremont's expression was a very interesting one. He stood there with the dice forgotten in his hand, staring at Reasoner as though unable to comprehend what he had heard. Reasoner left him to think it over. He glanced at the bartender. "Bogart around?"

"Here," said a voice.

He hadn't heard the office door open but, turning now, saw Sim Bogart's solid shape filling it, one shoulder leaning against the frame, a cheroot between his flat lips. Hard to say how long he had been standing there, looking on and listening. He pushed away from the doorframe, strode forward. "Something on your mind?"

"Yeah."

From his pocket Reasoner took a rubber-handled sixshooter, laid it on the bar, and gave it a push that sent it scooting down the polished surface toward the saloon owner.

Bogart stopped its sliding and picked up the weapon, curiously. "What's this?" he grunted. Then his glance touched on the initials carved into the handle—"G. F." His expression hardened and a slow flush began to creep upward through his heavy jowls.

"That's right," Reasoner told him. "It belongs to Grady Franks. He tried to 'bush me and I had to take

it away from him."

The man's narrowed eyes bored into the other's. "But why give it to me? I got nothing more to do with Grady Franks. I told you I kicked him out of here last Saturday, and told him to stay out!"

"Yes, I know. That's what you told me." Jim Reasoner paused, letting the silence run out just a second longer than was necessary. Then he shrugged. "Throw the gun away, then—or keep it to remember him by. I sure as blazes don't want it!"

His meaning was clear enough. Sim Bogart had been given to understand that his story of firing Franks was only half believed. Leaving it at that, Reasoner turned back to pay for the sealed bottle that had been set out for him and pocket it.

"Thanks for the drink," he told Tremont. "Makes three I owe you. I'll square it some time."

"Hold on!"

TREMONT seemed to have reached a sudden decision. He pulled silver from his pocket, slapped it on the bar—then hesitated, as his eye hit upon the amber liquor in the glass beside his elbow. Frowning, he shot a glance at the face of the bar clock. It lacked a few minutes of the half hour he had set himself. Nevertheless, with a shrug of narrow shoulders, the consumptive lifted the glass and drained it off at a single swallow, grimacing sourly.

"If you don't mind my company," he said, "I think perhaps I'll ride along with you."

"Why should it matter to me?" said Reasoner.

But as he walked away from the bar with Tremont's gaunt frame hitching along beside him, he had a very definite impression that it did matter to Sim Bogart. The saloon owner stood there with Franks' six-gun forgotten in his hand, and glowered narrowly after the pair. Reasoner could almost feel the man's eyes boring into his shoulders, before the batwings swung to and they were out in the lengthening light and shadow of the street.

He didn't know why, exactly, he

should feel so certain all at once that Bogart didn't like Tremont riding with him—riding to Diamond Wheel. It was altogether curious, the way one thing and another—intangible, unconnected things—kept swinging his attention back to a focus on the Seven-Up owner, stirring formless suspicions...

There was a delay while Tremont hired himself a gentle, slow-gaited roan gelding from the livery stable, and then they hit the trail. Tremont was a poor horseman and Reasoner found himself holding back to accommodate his slower pace, so that the day ran out sooner than he had anticipated and coming on of twilight found them still some miles from the ranch. A vast silence lay upon the rolling valley; the sky turned steel-gray and the first stars glimmered.

Once as they halted to blow their mounts a moment, the consumptive said, bluntly, "Got any questions, Reasoner?"

The other looked at him through the settling darkness. "Should I have? What about?"

"That would be up to you," grunted Tremont. "As I remember, the last time we talked you dredged up plenty. Hard to believe your curiosity has failed you so soon."

"I don't believe you like me much, do you?" Jim Reasoner commented, thoughtfully. "Or is it just the job I'm trying to do here? Maybe that's why this curiosity of mine makes you so uneasy."

Paul Tremont's head swiveled sharply toward him. "And why the devil should it matter to me? I said once I was glad to see a fast gun on the Diamond Wheel payroll. Do you think I was lying?"

"Well, now look who's asking questions!" murmured Reasoner, and with no other answer than that kicked his sorrel forward.

Afterwards, nothing more was said as they rode. The miles fell back, and the pinpoint of a lamp glowing in the Diamond Wheel house showed on the black, rolling land ahead of them.

CHAPTER VI

REASONER was never to forget that evening in the Diamond Wheel ranch house. It made a pleasant break in the monotony of nights on round-up, to lounge in a rawhide-bottomed easy chair beside the living room fireplace and watch Walt Shapley and his step-son huddled over a gaming board and chessmen.

Of the game they played he could make little; the men appeared to move in all kinds of erratic patterns and the objective remained completely bewildering, as well as the great lapse of time that occurred between each highly deliberate move. But the players themselves—the frail old man and the ailing young one, silent and nearly motionless with the lamp throwing their shadows huge against the wall—this oddly-matched pair were to him a subject of interested speculation.

A kind of constraint appeared to lie upon them both, during this first visit in many months that Paul Tremont had made to the ranch; now that he was actually here, they seemed to have little they could talk about, and both turned to the chess board with signs of evident relief. Nevertheless, Reasoner thought it touching to see the effort old Shapley went to in order to make his step-son welcome.

But he noticed, too, that no mention was made of the quart of bonded whiskey that he knew Shapley kept in a sideboard, even though he saw Paul Tremont more than once casting looks in that direction. Tremont didn't ask for a drink, and the old man didn't offer one. It was a point of tacit agreement between them.

Reasoner slept in the deserted bunkhouse that night, and with dawn was up and saddling for his return to the round-up wagon. He threw himself together a quick meal in the cook shack kitchen and pulled out of the ranch before either Shapley or

his step-son, who had slept in the spare room, had wakened.

...And so, back to the routine of the gather—to the bawling of frightened cattle, the swish of circling ropes, the smell of sweat and heated iron and burning flesh; back to the daylong pressure of work, and to soggy Dutch-oven cooking and the sand that gritted between a man's teeth at every bite. The second week of the big job came off without notable event, but also without any improvement in the surly feeling of tension that hung over the crew.

As the round-up wagon worked southward on the last leg of the sweep over its appointed section of the valley, Reasoner kept daily check with Matt Harbin on the tally figures. With slight fluctuations, they held to a pattern that had already developed: Bregman's Circle Dot continued to run far below what it should have been, while Diamond Wheel held slightly above the normal expectation of winter losses. Joe Sedgwick, of Clawhammer, had no complaint to make of his own tallies; but this added nothing to Bregman's sour mood. For after all, Clawhammer was not one of the brands that could have been converted into a Diamond Wheel.

"We may know more what's going on," Matt Harbin prophesied bleakly, "when we learn what the Yorks and their shirt-tail neighbors with the other wagon have turned up..."

The dawn of the round-up's last day broke at last, dreary and gray beneath a sheet of clouds that had come spreading across the sky the evening before, from beyond the western rim. In the night there had been rain, and all during that day an intermittent drizzle came and let up and came again—just enough of it to add the irritant of wet clothing and chill to the impatience a man felt for getting this job over, now that the tail end of it was in sight.

That day the wagons had completed their swings from the extreme ends of the valley and they were staked out in sight of each other; separated by a stretch of sodden

bunch grass flats, the two branding fires smoked and sputtered, the two crews drove their mounts, whittling away at the diminishing gathers of unworked cattle.

Finally, with late afternoon, Joe Sedgwick jerked loose the piggin string and stepped back to let a new-branded Diamond Wheel calf struggle, bawling, to its feet; and someone said, "That was the last one!" A tired cheer greeted the news. Riders swung wearily from saddle and made a stiff-legged stampede for the cookwagon, and the coffee pot.

One growled, "I hope the Seven-Up has got in a good stock of likker! I can tell now I'm gonna need plenty to take this chill out of my bones, tonight!"

WHILE the riders enjoyed the letdown of spirit following the completion of an arduous job, Matt Harbin and the owners loped their broncs over toward the other wagon for the official check-up. Jim Reasoner went with them. There was little good humor on the faces of these men, and scowls greeted them as they came in on the York camp.

The second wagon hadn't finished its work yet; as Matt had predicted, they found a lack of order and method here, the branding getting done somehow or other and to the accompaniment of curses and turbulent brawling among the men. Reasoner noted an empty bottle that had been discarded in the boot-tramped mud beside the branding fire. And the sour smell of it was in the breath and even in the clothing of Crib York as he came slouching over to meet the committee from the other wagon.

Crib's right arm was still in a sling, his six-shooter stuck into waistband so that its bone handle could be reached by the fingers of his left. He favored the newcomers with a scowl that turned thunderous as his glance found Reasoner's face among the others.

Yonder, by the wagon, Annie York had on a rain-soaked slouch hat and a man's slicker that hung long on her slender body, reaching almost to

the ground; she'd had to take up several turns in its voluminous, too-big sleeves. Beside her loomed the gaunt figure of Ollie York, and Dale was watching from near the fire. They all paired Crib York's dark look as he halted, legs spread and faced the riders from the Diamond Wheel camp.

Matt Harbin threw a glance around the layout, and at the men struggling and swearing over a calf by the branding fire. "Not through with your work yet?" he observed drily. "Don't worry about us!" Crib grunted. "We'll be in town tonight before you buckos have got all the whiskey drunk!"

Lewt Bregman's stubborn mind had room for only one subject and he broke in impatiently, "Well, how did things shape up? I only hope to blazes you found a good-sized drift of my Circle Dot beef, or I'm ending way in the hole!"

York gave him a slow stare; the bearded lips quirked with something that wasn't quite humor. He said, bluntly, "Then you're out of luck, Bregman. Not more than thirty-fourty head of Circle Dots showed up in our gathers. After all," he pointed out, "to drift onto our range, they'd of had to get clear across Diamond Wheel. And it ain't often one would be apt to slip through, is it?"

Jerking sharply erect in saddle, Matt Harbin said, "Are you insinuating something, York?"

The bearded man met his look, with eyes that were heavy-lidded and mean. "I'll answer that question," he said, "after somebody tells me what became of the Rockin' Y stuff that should be ranging this grass and ain't!"

"Watch your tongue, York," said Jim Reasoner, quickly.

The warning whipped the bearded man's attention to him, and Crib's splayed, rope-scarred left hand made an awkward spasmodic jerk in the direction of the gun in his waistband. "As for you—"

"Want me to smash your other arm?" Reasoner flung at him, his words sharp as a slap across the face. At the same moment, half his

attention was reserved for the other pair of brothers, who were glowering at him thunderously. He knew he teetered on the edge of serious trouble, but he held his challenging stare on the face of the man before him, and in the end it was Crib York who broke gaze.

THE BIG man let the tip of a narrow tongue snake out and moisten bearded lips. He shot a side-long glance at each of his brothers, and something must have warned him that, even with their support, the odds were all against him.

Backing down, he took refuge in a sneering bluster. "Proddy, ain't you—both you and your hired gunman! Wouldn't be your conscience bothering you, Harbin?" He ran the ball of a thumb across his bony, hawkish nose. "Well, you ain't pickin' a fight with us—not when there's a job that needs finishing. And after the job is done and all the tallies are in, could be you'll have your hands so full of trouble you won't have time to go around looking for more."

"We'll see," replied Matt Harbin, coldly. He jerked rein, turning his mount. "I'm taking the wagon in," he told his companions. "The rain is startin' again and there's no point freezing in it when there's warm fires waiting for us. It turns a man's temper poison mean, too, and makes him careless of the things he says. For now, I'm through talkin'." He gave Jim Reasoner a meaningful jerk of the head. "Come on, Jim."

Reasoner fell in behind him. They rode away through the sharp lancing of the renewed drizzle. Reasoner glanced back once and saw the clot of horsemen, and those about the York branding fire, staring silently after them. Ollie had moved forward and was talking to his brother, both scowling. Over by the wagon, Annie York was a small figure, almost comical in the oversize fishskin slicker.

"Well?" said Reasoner, looking sidelong at his friend. Matt Harbin's jaw was set hard, his eyes bleak behind narrowed lids. He shook his

head, wearily.

"It's a devil of a job, this one," he said, savagely, "for a man with pride in him. Was a time any man who called me the things I been called in this country, by word or implication, would have needed to back his saying up with fists, lead—or proof.

"And here I am now with my back to the wall, and taking such talk from them York vermin because too many of my other neighbors—including honest and respectable men like Lewt Bregman and Joe Sedgwick—hold to the same opinion of me. And you can't fight an entire range!"

"Maybe," grunted the younger man. A moment later, as they neared the Diamond Wheel wagon, he added: "You make any sense yet out of the round-up tallies, Matt?"

Harbin checked it to him. "Do you?"

"I notice this: Bregman's shortages are entirely in the older stock—the three-year-olds, especially. He's long on yearlings and twos; and the calf crop is normal for the number of she-stuff he has left, though it's under what he would have counted on with a normal distribution of ages. Naturally, he's not satisfied."

"And what do you make out of all that?" his friend wanted to know, giving him a curious look.

"Maybe nothing," said Reasoner. "On the other hand, I got a kind of a hunch. I'll do some work on it and let you know..."

Matt Harbin let it go at that. They had reached the camp, and he started giving his men their orders to load up the chuck wagon, kick out the fires, and start rolling for Diamond Wheel headquarters.

The work was done without much talk. The men from the other outfits who had joined Diamond Wheel for the round-up merely stood about and watched, silent and sullen. The forced companionship of the wagon camp had fallen away from all of them, now that the big job was finished.

With the wagon loaded, and the remuda started for home under the prodding saddle-ropes of a couple of the hands, Matt Harbin's crew hit

saddle and took off with a whoop. One or two of the punchers remaining behind lifted a faint yell in answer. On the whole, though, a poor kind of send-off, considering the days these men had shared the same campfire, drunk from the same tin cups...

Rain was streaking pretty hard, again, against a sickly, red-streaked sunset, when they got into the home ranch; the warm promise of lamp-glow in the windows of the house was a welcome sight to that crew of wet and hungry riders. They clattered noisily into the yard, and Walt Shapley came out onto the veranda to see them ride in.

CHAPTER VII

WITH MORNING, the cloud sheet had vanished and a sky of sparkling blue, washed clean by the rain, smiled upon the wide acres of the valley's bunch grass range. Westward, beyond the rimrock wall, the timbered peaks still wore a crown of misty gray but that was the only reminder of the misery of spring round-up's final days.

In the cook shack, at breakfast, Jim Reasoner listened to the Diamond Wheel hands discuss their evening in town. He'd stayed at the ranch, himself, but judged it had been quite a blowout. All the outfits had been in, making up in one evening for those weeks of saddle and hard work.

But it had not been all hilarity, either. Nothing was directly said of this, but he sensed it in certain omissions and sudden silences in their talk. One of the men had a bruised jaw which he didn't bother to explain, and another favored a swollen knuckle.

They were mute evidence of the trouble these loyal punchers wouldn't talk about—of veiled hints made against their iron, that they had resented and answered in their own forthright manner. Probably Diamond Wheel could count itself lucky, all things considered, that the night hadn't ended even more ex-

plosively.

Sobered by these reflections, and by the realization that squarely on his shoulders lay the job of solving the riddle of this range before worse trouble could come from it, Reasoner returned to the bunkhouse and, tired as he was from the saddle, again made up his pack for an uncertain time on the trail. At the day corral, he roped out his sorrel gelding, which he hadn't used much during round-up and was fresh and ready for the trail. He got the saddle cinched on an was lashing his pack down behind it when he saw Matt Harbin coming toward him.

His friend wore a puzzled frown. "You look almost like you were checking out," he observed.

"Not that," Reasoner assured him. "Just a little riding I want to do. Dunno how long I might be out." He saw the question in Matt Harbin's faded eyes, but his only explanation was: "I told you last night, I had a hunch or two I aimed to do some work on. There may be nothing to it, but it's worth a look. Expect me back when you see me..."

Mounting, he rode away from the ranch headquarters, pointing westward and northward into the very range that he had covered with the round-up wagon during these last weeks.

He reached Alkali Wells, where the wagon's wide swing had started, and rested and watered his sorrel—there were one or two clear springs here, as well as the white-encrusted seeps of polluted, brackish alkali. As he waited he studied thoughtfully the rimrock wall that lifted sheer in front of him, barren, a pinkish dun in color, its sharp drop-off broken by the numerous cracks which were really good-sized ravines giving access to timbered heights beyond.

At the foot of the wall the valley floor tilted and broke like surf, in a tangle of low foothills. High above and beyond were the three lone peaks of the front range, thrust above timber line and shrouded now by a clinging scarf of cloud-wrack.

Matt Harbin had said that cattle never strayed into those gulches and

cracks in the porous lift of tawny stone, but from the first Jim Reasoner had found a keen interest in that upcountry. There were certain facts which added up, to his way of looking at it.

Plainly, at some time or other in the past, rustlers had been at work on the valley herds; and if so, what was more probable than that the stolen beef had been siphoned through the rimrock and into the hills? It should be obvious—except that the suspicions of the losers had been turned against the Diamond Wheel brand instead and had blinded them to this other possibility.

It was strange that Matt Harbin hadn't guessed, but of course Diamond Wheel had lost no cattle itself and until the recently completed round-up tallies confirmed his neighbors' talk of losses, he hadn't been sure that there was any more to this than the talk. So perhaps it was not too surprising that no one had looked farther than the ends of their own noses.

BUT IT was Jim Reasoner's job to do the thing that others had neglected. He tossed away the butt of the cigarette he had finished smoking, took up the slack in his bronc's cinch and swung again to saddle. He left the Wells and pushed straight ahead toward the looming wall of the rimrock.

In a grassy pocket, just beneath its barren lift, he made a discovery. At first he narrowly missed the significance of it, but he had a cowman's discerning eye that warned him something was wrong, and then found the answer to his hunch.

A hundred head or so of Diamond Wheels were grazing there. Seemingly, nothing was amiss in that; it was Shapley graze and the round-up, sweeping through these breaks scarcely two weeks ago, had found plenty of his stock grazing it. But what was wrong was the condition of the cattle, themselves. For so late in the season, it looked to Reasoner that they weren't fleshed out as they should have been. Not that they were gaunted, really; but to an eye which

could estimate the weight of an animal with a glance, they seemed a little too thinned down for beef that had wintered, uninterruptedly, on the nutritious grass of the valley floor.

Cattle looked like that when they had finished a drive across a lengthy trail, and had not yet replaced the lard run off them in the process....

Frowning at the shape of his thoughts, Reasoner put his sorrel among the feeding jag of beef, sizing them up more carefully and paying strict attention to the brands. They seemed all right—as far as you could ever say that about the mass of scar-tissue Walt Shapley's iron left on a cow's hide. But then, drawing rein sharply, Jim Reasoner narrowed down on one particular brand and he sat motionless, studying it for long minutes.

The Diamond Wheel, it seemed to him, had been slapped on crudely and hastily; rather inexpertly blended into the running iron's work he was sure he could detect an original Turkey Track beneath.

The troubling part of it was, he knew of no Turkey Track registered in the valley.

His sixgun slid partway from holster into his hand, and he started to swing right leg across the cantle and step down from saddle. For there was always one way to make certain in any doubtful case—and that was by killing the steer and examining the underside of the burned hide, where the original brand would show up in spite of later applications of a running iron.

But then he shoved the Colt back into place and settled into saddle once more, picking up the reins. As far as he was concerned, he decided grimly, the thing didn't need any confirmation. He hadn't forgotten another foreign brand—that Leaning H—that had turned up from nowhere in the spring gather. That all added up to something.

He looked again at the rimrock wall, and the brushy hills piled against its base. A ravine opened just ahead of him, debouching into the little pocket where the cattle

grazed. Jim Reasoner touched up his sorrel with the spurs, and headed for the mouth of the ravine.

The shadow of the rim lay full upon him now, for the day was running out and the sun had dipped beyond the peaks. There was sign pointing this way, left by that jag of cattle he had seen back there. And, presently, he found himself at the base of the sheer thrust of steep rock—and at the foot of a slot in the wall, that was deep-cleft and narrow.

A COLD down-draft breathed out at him, with the low, moaning sound of air pushed through a confining space. Unlikely as it might be, the tracks he followed came directly from this slit. And so, prodding his reluctant sorrel, Reasoner rode into it.

The floor tilted steeply, treacherous underfoot with its covering of shale and rubble; and it was night already between those sheer walls of living rock. At places his stirrup leathers brushed the narrowing sides of the slot. He muttered aloud, "They must have shoved those steers down this, one at a time! It couldn't have been any fun..."

He didn't try to hunt for sign anymore, knowing there would be none in this rubble except for the droppings of the cattle. He kept on, with his sorrel fighting the steep pitch of the floor. And at last more light filtered in about him and then he was topping out on the rim itself. Behind him lay the valley—golden with the haze of late sunlight, smoky and deep blue where the shadow of the rim swelled within its wide basin. Ahead, the shelf of the rimrock merged with the timber of the front range, climbing toward the peaks.

It would not be easy to crack the riddle of this rimrock country. No telling how many thousand head of stolen cattle might have been si-phoned back and forth through the many eroded knife-slits in this wall, and yet with so many routes available it was likely the rustlers had been careful to use none often

enough for a discoverable trail to have been laid down. The shelf of rock itself would hold no sign whatsoever. Back in the timber, there would be sign but he couldn't expect an easy time searching it out.

"A big job," he grunted, for the tenth time. "But I know at last I'm on the right track. Now it's only a matter of blind hunting until I smell it out!"

Night was hard upon him, however, and soon caught him with nothing yet accomplished. Jim Reasoner made dry camp, spreading his ground sheet among scrub pine at the base of an upthrust sliver of rock, and eating cold trail rations from his saddle pack. With the sorrel picketed, he leaned back for a smoke before sleeping, looking up at the stars and listening to the wind moan among the timber behind him.

Sometime later, in the middle of the night, he roused to the instinctive warning of something amiss and was seated bolt upright, one hand already fumbling for sixgun, before he had come fully awake. He sat there, peering about him in the dark, and uncertain what might have wakened him, while behind him the picketed sorrel stamped once, its shoe iron striking a single clear note from a half-buried stone.

Then, he got his answer—not a sound, so much, as a faint tremor carried in the ground beneath him. He bent and put his ear against the earth again, and got its message clearly—somewhere, not too far distant, hoofs were striking the earth. A steady flow of them.

At once he was on his feet, rolling his blanket and hurrying to lash pack and saddle onto the sorrel. With bridle in place and the cinch tight, he stood a moment keening the night. There was no moon, and starlight gave little aid against the opacity of the darkness around him. Wind stirring the pine heads masked other sound. He was very nearly riding blind when he swung up and nudged the sorrel forward, on the hunt for the source of that tremor the ground had conveyed to him.

BRUSH ROCKED and creaked about him, spruce swayed overhead in the wind. As he coursed back and forth, reining up to listen and then pushing ahead again, the vagrant wind brought now and again a hint of meaningful sound that was instantly gone. But the fugitive starlight and the night noises led only to confusion, distracting him as he tried to narrow down on something definite. In a night so filled with sound, none of it was of any help to him.

More than once, Reasoner dropped from saddle again to test the sounding-board of the earth. At first it still carried its message of running hoofs, but more faintly now and even less definite of direction. Then even this failed him, and he rose slowly to his feet with a curse at the lost chance. In these crazy, unfamiliar hills, and at night, his search had been doomed before it started.

Doggedly, however, he returned to the saddle, past the thought of making camp again or trying for further sleep. And only a few minutes later, having quartered down the wall of a shallow trough, something caused the sorrel to stumble briefly and Reasoner came down from leather to investigate.

The flickering light of a thumbled match told the story. The hoofs of an uncertain number of cattle had gone rolling through this ravine, chopping up the ground and turning it mushy and treacherous underfoot. Among these cloven prints, his quick glance picked up those of shod horses. Yes, riders had been that way, shoving a jag of beef toward the rim break-off and the steep descent to valley range. And it had been done since the recent rains.

Satisfaction quirked Jim Reasoner's flat lips, at the first clear sign that he had stumbled upon here. But because there was no point trying to make anything of this sign by starlight, he took his sorrel by the bridle and led it off the track into grass and put in on the picket again.

After that, settled with his back

against a rock, he got out makings and built a smoke, satisfied to rest there and practice patience as he waited for the dawn which was not too many hours away.

CHAPTER VIII

WITH THE sun straight over head at high noon, Jim Reasoner stood hidden in the fringe of a stand of cedar and watched activity in a small green cup of mountain meadow lying below him. Smoke drew blue-gray, wavering pencil lines from the chimneys of a pair of shacks, near the entrance of the cup that was perhaps a half mile deep and a third as wide at the point where the granite walls stood furthest apart. Down there cattle grazed, and four riders were at work around a small, hot fire. Voices, and the bawling of frenzied steers, came up to him as he watched a couple of mounted men cut steers out of the herd, run them toward the fire, and rope and throw them for the other two to do their job with heated irons. The work went steadily and smoothly; these men were cowhands, expert and efficient. It wasn't calves they handled, but full-grown beef.

For a man of Reasoner's training following the trail once found had not proven too difficult a chore. The tracks of other bunches of driven cattle had joined the first, as he worked back into the hills. He had lost them all for a time, in an extensive outcropping of impervious lava rock. But by swinging back and forth in widening, concentric circles, he'd picked them up again. And now, with the day half gone, he stood on this spine of timbered ridge and looked upon the goal of his search.

A sound broke the stillness, suddenly, that jerked him quickly erect with one hand slapping at his holstered gun. The voice of a rifle speaking sharply somewhere above and behind him... Startled, he crouched in the shadow of the trees and hunted out the tangled slopes, as the shot volleyed away in long,

rolling echoes that spent themselves and died in a distant mutter of sound.

He was so well hidden that he decided, finally, the rifle could not have been fired at himself. And when he thought to look again into the hollow below him, it was to see that the men down there were continuing with their work as though unperturbed and taking no alarm from the shot.

He grunted, and forced the tautness out of him. "Then it wasn't a warning," he said, aloud, figuring the thing out. "One of the crew must be after game."

But even with the comforting realization, there came a new thought to stamp a troubled scowl upon him. For, if one of them were above him, he was trapped—even if he hadn't been seen already, he would have a hard time withdrawing without attracting attention, and he didn't relish the thought of a running fight through these unfamiliar hills. He had learned enough to guess that the men who operated this brand-changing outfit in the hidden meadow would give anyone a bad time that they discovered snooping around it.

Then his face altered, his eyes went flinty with sudden determination. With all he knew, there was still more he needed to find out; and the presence of the rifleman above, crowding him, helped him to his nervy decision.

Since he couldn't retreat, the only thing left was to go boldly forward. And, turning to his sorrel, Jim Reasoner lifted unhesitatingly into saddle. Minutes later he was riding openly out of the trees, seeking an easy way down the sloping wall of the cup.

He made it, letting the sorrel pick its way, and without haste. He skirted the shacks, and had approached within a few hundred yards of the branding fire when someone there glanced up and saw him. Instantly, the work was forgotten; and as Reasoner rode up and halted it was to be greeted by a quartet of scowling, hostile faces.

None of them was anyone he'd ever seen before, but he was familiar enough with the type. They were outlaws—boot-tough, hard-eyed, and dangerous to a degree. More than one hand rested on a gunbutt as the four of them looked at Reasoner in cold silence—a couple mounted on sweaty, dirt-caked broncs, the other pair standing beside a panting steer that lay with the ropes on it, tongue lolling, as it waited for the burn of the iron.

One of the men—a tall, stoop-shouldered, red-bearded man who stood with legs widespread and lantern jaw shot forward—said in a harsh voice: "Hold it, fellow—right where you are! Who the devil are you? And how did you find this place?"

REASONER took his time about answering. He hipped over to a comfortable seat in the saddle, favored the man with a slow regard that held no particular awe of him. He said, finally, "Well now, those aren't easy questions to answer—expecially for a gent that's not in the habit of trotting out his life story every time some loudmouth starts riding him.

"As for who I am," he went on, casually ignoring the redbearded one's quick scowl of anger, "I can't tell you yet; I got tired of the name I was using and haven't thought up a new one. And finding this layout of yours wasn't any problem, when I had directions."

"Directions?" echoed the man, sharply. "Who from?"

"I think he'd rather I didn't say."

There was a long silence, as the four studied this intruder and tried to figure out what to make of him. Jim Reasoner let it run out to just the right point and then he demanded, sourly: "Well, how about it? Do I get an invite to light down—or was I misinformed that you could use another hand, here?"

In plain indecision, the redbeard stirred and exchanged a look with his companions. "Did this gent, that you won't name, tell you what kind of a deal we got here?"

"Sure—as if I couldn't guess." Reasoner glanced down at the steer that lay tied waiting for the iron. The brand it now wore was a J-K Connected—a foreign one to him. He said, "It must take a pretty sure hand to turn that into a Diamond Wheel without botching the job."

The other seemed to come to a decision. "All right," he said reluctantly. "We do need help—half the crew is off on a swing picking up stock, and meanwhile there's word from the boss that we have to make a shipment tonight. So, shed your saddle. There's grub in the shack yonder if you're hungry, and one of the boys went up on the mountain to try for a buck. I'm Gimp Mays," he added, drily. "Let us know when you've figured out who you are."

"I will," Reasoner promised, and nodding to the four rode over to the shack Mays had indicated, and swung down.

They weren't sure of him yet, though by talking up to them he'd made them accept him—for the moment, anyway. It was a ticklish situation, but he'd been forced into it and now he meant to listen and learn—and keep his mouth shut. But he'd have to play the cards just right....

One of the shacks was a bunkhouse, untidy and foul-smelling; the other, smaller one was the mess shack. Both were empty. He looked into the first to count the bunks—a couple against each wall, with further evidence that part of the crew slept on the littered floor. Then he went into the kitchen and, finding airtights and other provisions in a box cupboard nailed above the stove, realized he was hungry and threw together a hasty bait of grub. The man who did the cooking was probably the one who had taken his rifle and gone looking for venison to break the monotony of beef and beans—the one whose shooting had driven Reasoner out of hiding and down into this camp.

HIS MAKESHIFT meal bolted quickly, Reasoner went outside again to rejoin the men at the fire;

this time, he pitched in and helped with the work. They accepted him with little comment, and he said nothing. But he kept his ears open to the talk that went on as the steers were brought to the fire, one by one, and thrown and rebranded to the Shapley Diamond Wheel.

There were three brands in this bunch they were working—J-K Connected, Turkey Track, and Greek Cross. He gathered from talk he heard that all three had come a considerable distance to reach this way station, with farther yet to go when the burnt-over brands had been given time to heal. The running iron work was done with neatness and efficiency. Gimp Mays did the branding and he was a master at it; obviously, too, he was the one who gave the orders here. Yet he was patently not the final boss of this rustler syndicate.

The cook came into camp, with a fresh haunch of venison, canvas-wrapped, tied down behind the saddle to speak for the accuracy of his shooting. He was an old puncher, his body saddle warped and brutally twisted as the result of some riding accident from which he'd never mended, and which had ruined him for regular saddle work. He gave Reasoner no more than a glance, and went into the cook shack to begin throwing food together; he seemed to have no interest in the longriders who came and went and ate his grub.

Shortly after this, work was suspended. The branding fire was scattered and put out, and the tired crew returned to the bunkshack to wait for grub and to rest up against the ride they had ahead of them. There were three hundred head of reworked beef to be picked up and delivered to a fence, Gimp Mays said. Reasoner asked, mildly, "How far do we have to take them?" But he got no answer. It was not proving easy to probe information out of these outlaws.

Night was full, with stars coming bright overhead as the steel-gray sky of dusk deepened, when the five of them rode away from the hide-out. The glow of the cookshack lamp

lost itself behind them, and the mutter of the herd fell away; after that there was only the night sounds of the deep hills, and the creak and pop of their own saddle leather and thud of hoofs.

They rode without talking much, following a dim drive trail that led down to the rim. In the dense darkness, Gimp Mays set his men a stiff pace.

Jim Reasoner rode with his thoughts. He was in the midst of a ticklish situation, that might blow up on him at any time. True; these men had accepted him, however grudgingly; but the risks were tremendous.

For there was always the danger of running into some member of the organization who would recognize him as the new gunhawk of Diamond Wheel. And if that happened, this bluff of his would be soon over. Even for Jim Reasoner, odds of four to one weren't good to think about.

Still, this hand had been dealt him and he meant to play it out, as far as it would take him. He had already guessed considerably about the workings of the rustling syndicate. Plainly, they were using Walt Shapley and his cumbersome Diamond Wheel as an innocent front, and the medium of their crookedness. Stolen cattle from a number of ranches outside the valley were driven—sometimes over long distances—into the hills, where they were reworked to the Shapley iron and then, if necessary, spotted among Shapley's own herds until a fence was able to arrange for their disposal. In such big—scale operations, it was understandable how an occasional steer, like that Leaning H that had showed up so inexplicably during the round-up, could manage to slip through with its brand unchanged. But it wouldn't happen often.

NOW, BY sticking with Gimp Mays, Reasoner was in a good position to find out still more that he needed to know. The identity of the fence, for one thing. And,

most necessary of all, that of the mastermind who must be at the head of such a complicated, smoothly-functioning organization. So Reasoner kept his mouth shut, his gun loose in holster, and his eye on his companions as they jingled through the starlit darkness...

Mays, apparently, knew this rim-rock country like the reflection of his own face in a mirror. Without any fumbling he led his crew across the hills and onto the rim, and then down through one of the many cracks in the wall to the valley floor below. Here they came, presently, upon a jog of hundred head or so of beef that had been spotted in a corner of Shapley's graze.

Mays said, "These are the Quarter Circle W's and Diamond T's. Start 'em rolling! We'll pick up the Turkey Tracks, throw the two bunches together, and head out..."

Someone interrupted him with a sharp, whispered warning: "Rider coming!"

All talking broke off. Whipping about, the men froze in saddle watching the dimly visible shape of the mounted figure, coming toward them. It hauled up a few rods away; the night wind bouncing off the face of the high cliff and running across the rise and dip of the breaks made the only sound for a moment. Then a voice called softly: "Mays?"

Saddle leather creaked as the outlaw shifted position slightly. "Yeah," he grunted. "Come on in, Grady!"

Breath that had been caught and held was released as the quick tension ran out of these men, and now Grady Franks kicked his bronc forward. And very quietly, Jim Reasoner eased his long-barreled Colt from holster, knowing this was the moment he had feared would come, to place him with his back in a dangerous corner.

Barely had the blued barrel cleared leather, when a crushing blow descended on his wrist. The gun was knocked spinning from his hand. The muzzle of the weapon which had struck his arm was shoved, hard, against his ribs.

A voice in his ear rasped, "This

guy pulled an iron, Gimp! I seen him! I been watchin' him, close—I knew he wasn't to be trusted!"

CHAPTER IX

HIS WHOLE arm numbed by that clubbing blow, Reasoner sat helpless while the rustlers closed in on him. Grady Franks had joined the group now and he demanded sharply, "Who is he, Mays?"

"Who knows?" the redbear growled. "He dropped in on the hideout this afternoon, said he'd been sent to join the crew but didn't mention any names—including his own. We was short handed so I took him on, but I been suspicious of him too."

"I never sent anybody in," grunted Franks. "And neither did Bogart. We knew you'd be needing help and so I come myself to lend a hand tonight. But we never sent nobody."

"Then who's this joker?" demanded the one with the gunmuzzle poked into the prisoner's ribs.

"Put a light on him!" Franks ordered. "Let me have a look!"

A match was fumbled out of a pocket, snapped to life against thumb nail. As the flickering wash of light sprang across Jim Reasoner's face, he saw its gleam reflected in the eyes of Grady Franks. He heard the rasp of his enemy's sharp-drawn breath. "You!"

Then the matchflame died. Gimp Mays said, "You know him, Grady?"

"Know him? Why, you blame simpletons! This is Jim Reasoner, himself! This is Shapley's imported gunhawk!"

A choked exclamation broke from the redbear. "Reasoner! How in blazes was we to know that? We'd never laid eyes on him—and he was the last man we'd ever expect to have come riding straight into the hideout!"

"Well, that's who he is. He's played you for a bunch of suckers. And it makes me real happy to see him!" Grady Franks added, a note of cruel gloating in his voice. "There's things to be settled be-

tween the two of us!" Metal whispered on leather as a gun slipped into his palm.

Even at that moment, even with death's panting breath hot upon his neck, an icy calm was in Jim Reasoner's voice. "And this is the way you like to settle them? Against a man with an empty holster?"

"Brother," breathed Franks, "this way suits me fine! Any way at all that ends with you dead—and not ever again making a fool out of me!"

"I didn't know," said Reasoner, bleakly, "even you could be that yellow!"

Next moment he was ducking wildly in an effort to avoid the sweep of Franks' gunbarrel, as the man stood up in the stirrups and put all his weight behind a clubbing arc. The muzzle of the weapon rammed into his side blocked him and he wasn't able to dodge the full force of the blow. It knocked him clear out of the saddle, stretched him out on the dark ground beneath his bronc's hoofs.

Dazed, he lay and listened to Grady Franks' voice cut across the others' excited shouts: "Leave him alone! Leave him alone, dammit! He's mine!"

Franks had come down from saddle now. He stood over Reasoner and the latter felt the sharp prod of his boot toe. "Talk big!" Franks gritted at him. "Go ahead—I like to hear you. Because, I'll make you grovel before I'm finished!"

Pushing up to a sitting position, Reasoner felt of the side of his head. His questing fingers found the stickiness of blood and he winced at the pain. A little groggily, he peered up at the dark form of the man standing over him, and at the sheen of star-glow on the barrel of the leveled sixgun. He shook his head.

"No, Grady. You can do your worst, but I don't grovel to the likes of you—or to Sim Bogart, either. So you might as well kill me," he went on, flatly. "I've learned the setup now. If you let me live, I'll blow the pair of you, and your whole rustling syndicate, clear out of the water!"

HE WANTED to keep the man talking, keep him saying anything; because just so long as he could do that, he could keep Grady's finger off the trigger. And meanwhile, surreptitiously, his own hand was searching over the dark grass, hunting for the weapon that had been knocked out of his fingers a few minutes ago. It was a slim chance, but Jim Reasoner was one to play every hand until the last card had fallen and the last chip had been raked in.

Grady Franks took up his statement with a taunting laugh. "You'll blow nobody out of nothin'!" he retorted. "You had us scared, bad, for awhile; I admit it. You came into this country and threw so much weight on Diamond Wheel's side that we were afraid you'd make us real trouble. But the threat's past. After tonight, Sim Bogart will be top man and nobody can unseat him!"

"You sound sure of it," grunted Reasoner. "How about the Yorks?"

Triumph edged the other's reply. "You don't know how smart a man Sim Bogart is!" he chuckled. "He's got them thick-headed Yorks playing his game for him! He made his peace with 'em, after you showed up. He's got them thinking that cleaning out the Diamond Wheel is the big job to be done. And right now—tonight—it's being taken care of."

An icy hand fingered Jim Reasoner's spine, as he crouched there in the grass looking up at the dim shape of Franks. "What do you mean?"

"Why," Franks explained, with a chuckle, "I mean that a Diamond Wheel calf following a Rockin' Y cow was all it took to send those black-bearded devils on the war path! I planted it where they'd be sure and find it, and waited around to watch until they did. Not over an hour ago, it was. Right now, they're pawing the ground and calling in them other tough friends of theirs. They'll powwow, and then they'll head for Diamond Wheel to tear it stick from stone and kill Walt Shapley if they can lay hands

on him.

"The Yorks won't settle for nothing less—not after the clear proof of that sleepered calf! But the beauty of the thing is, not me or Bogart or any of our men will have any clear part in the thing!"

"Maybe Bogart isn't as clever as he thinks!" Jim Reasoner's voice was ice-hard. "Destroying Shapley is the same as killing the goose that laid the gold eggs, isn't it? How can this rustling syndicate of yours work, without the Diamond Wheel to use as a blind?"

"Oh, we'll still have Diamond Wheel," said Franks, blandly. "The way things stand now, too many of the valley ranchers are suspicious of the brand. We'll throw Walt Shapley to the wolves, and start over with a clean slate." He added, "Bogart called the play for tonight because we found out you'd apparently pulled out of the valley—for where, nobody seemed to know. With you and your gun missing, it was too good a chance to pass up. Think how pleased Sim will be when I tell him you'll never be coming back—you'll never be able to worry us again..."

There was the click of the gun in Franks' hand, going to full cock. And Jim Reasoner, knowing this would have to be it, flung himself flat upon the earth, his arms sweeping in a wide arc across the grass—a last desperate try at locating the weapon he knew must be lying somewhere within a few feet of him.

HIS GROPING fingers touched the smooth, round coldness of its barrel. Even as he was scrabbling to snatch it up, the gun above him blasted. He felt the tooth of the bullet stab at him, raking across his back.

Then—almost as an echo to the shot—there came another. The voice of a rifle, speaking from the dark trees that footed a rise perhaps two hundred feet distant. As its shell screamed among the riders, they broke into excited shouting and the horses began to pitch. A second shot followed on the tail of the first, as

fast as the rifleman in the trees could pump the lever.

Grady Franks had whirled about, with an oath at this startling interruption. And Jim Reasoner, without any idea who it could be that was giving him this moment's chance, had got a hold on the fallen gun and was rolling over, coming to his knees.

Grady Franks turned and saw him like that and squeezed off a hasty shot—too hurriedly. It missed, although the blast of the muzzle fire was blindingly close. Then Reasoner worked the trigger of his own weapon; and he did not miss.

Past the smear of dazzling after-image, he had a glimpse of Grady Franks stumbling backward, driven by the force of lead, and then crumpling to the ground. The way the shot had gone home, Reasoner knew that he was dead. But then he was whirling to face another menace; above him, the bearded Gimp Mays had forced his plunging bronc under control and was lining down at him with the long, wicked snout of a Colt revolver.

Reasoner flung himself wildly to one side, at the same time throwing his gun up and dropping the hammer on a shell. Both shots missed their mark. But the rifle in the trees lashed again, and one of the outlaws' horses, squealing shrilly, went crashing to the ground beneath its rider.

The cattle in that grassy hollow were bawling in terror and milling restlessly, dust churning. Utter confusion held sway; and now something struck Reasoner in the back—a flopping, empty stirrup.

That was his own sorrel horse, sidestepping nervously at the racket of gunfire. Reasoner did not hesitate. With a wild grab, he hooked the saddle pommel, at the same moment yelling into the sorrel's ear. It started off, plunging. Somehow, Reasoner hauled himself into leather and found the stirrups. The reins, knotted together, were ready to his hand. Hunched low above the bronc's neck, he kicked it forward, heading for the trees.

A winging bullet followed him, but he only heard the hum of it streaking above his bent form. Then he had gained the trees and hauled rein a second, looking back. The remaining outlaws were coming, the bearded Gimp Mays leading them. Reasoner lifted his sixgun, let his arm sag.

He realized suddenly he was sick. The bullet streak across his shoulder was thawing into fire, and his head throbbed to the wallop of Grady Franks' gunbarrel. He found himself gripping the saddlehorn, to keep himself from going overside. And he thought, *Got to keep moving—got to get away!* He couldn't stand and fight off those riders.

Pulling the rein, he turned his sorrel and kicked it into a run. As he took the rise of ground beyond the trees he thought he heard the song of the rifle again, off somewhere to his left, but he couldn't think now about that mysterious marksman who had interfered just in time to save him, and who had broken that scene wide open with his quick bullets. With sick weakness on him, his only safety lay in flight.

TOPPING the ridge, he went down the other side and then struck off at a hard gallop through the bunch grass. He didn't know for sure if the others were still behind him but he couldn't risk waiting to be sure. The thing was to cover distance, fast. He fed his bronc the steel, and the sorrel responded with a reckless plunging flight over the uncertain ground.

Marshy ooze sucked at the sorrel's hoofs as it splashed through the shallows of a seep. A brushy slope cut down ahead and he pulled wide, hugging the base of it; then turned up the slanting draw between two shallow hills. Behind a cover of twisted juniper he pulled in, knowing he had done his best and that until he could regain some of his strength he could not stick longer in the saddle.

Waiting there in his hiding place, with reeking gun clamped in one hand and the other steadying himself against the saddlehorn, he

peered through the juniper branches and listened for the nearing pound of galloping hoofs. Minutes passed, and there was nothing—only the faint night noises and the sound of the wind washing through scrub timber. There had been time enough and to spare; and yet, he realized slowly, his pursuers hadn't showed. He must have lost them. Or that rifleman in the trees had turned them back...

A deep break eased through him, and he lowered the gun and let it go off cock. He lifted a leg across the saddle, dropped off onto solid ground and stood there a little shaky, steadying himself with a hand on stirrup fender. He muttered, "Wake up, damn you! You aren't going to let a clout on the skull and a bullet scratch lay you out! You got too big a chore ahead—"

He broke off, head jerking to listen. A rider, coming—only one, but moving unmistakably toward his hiding place. Sixgun at ready, he slipped around his horse to a point where he could see past the juniper screen and into the shadow-shrouded draw. The single horseman had stopped down there somewhere. He swiveled the barrel of his gun in a slow arc, hunting a sound or any gleam of reflected starlight to target.

Then came the voice of the rider—a low, frantic moan of despair, calling his name: "Jim Reasoner! For the love of heaven, answer me! Oh, where are you—?"

Incredulous, he recognized the voice. He fumbled for holster, shoved his gun into it. "Here!" he called hoarsely. "Up here, Annie York—in the trees!"

He started toward her, but his weakness and the uncertain footing of the draw combined against him. He fell, awkwardly, and before he could get to his feet again the girl had reached him, running lightly across the stones. She knelt and her arm was about his shoulder, steadying him. "They hurt you!" she cried.

He managed a shake of the head. "I'll be all right. Just a clout on the head, mostly—it turned me kind of sick."

"I'll be right back!" she said, and was quickly gone. When she returned from her horse it was to press the mouth of a bottle against his lips. "Here—this will help!"

He took the bottle from her, and had his drink. The whiskey burned its way through the fog of his brain, lending him its strength. The bottle was nearly empty so he drained it and, tossing it aside, muttered, "Thanks a lot! That's what I needed!"

SHE WAS so close he could feel her breath warm against his cheek, feel her hair brush against it. He said, in a species of wonder: "Then it was you—with the rifle?"

"It was me," Annie told him. "I've been riding the range these nights, trying to dig up some clue to the riddle of what's been going on around these parts. A body can't just sit and watch everything fall to pieces around him. And tonight I saw that Grady Franks cutting across our back range and trailed him to find out where he was headed. That's how I happened to be there just now."

"Lucky for me," he admitted. Wild, he had heard this girl called. At any rate, she was certainly a scrapper. She would take a gun to a man or, lacking that, her fists and nails; he remembered the time she'd tackled him with a horsewhip—that first day he saw her, in the dust of the town's main street.

He said, "Did you drop any of them, girl?"

"I don't think so; just one of the horses. There were four went after you, but you lost them somewhere along the way. I don't know where they went to."

Reasoner asked, "You heard what Grady Franks told me?"

"I heard everything!" She seized his arm, the grip of her little fingers tight with emotion. "Oh—Jim! Bogart's made fools of all us—my brothers, and this whole range. I understand that, now. And now, according to what those men said, my brothers are right this minute on their way to finish the thing by raid-

ing Diamond Wheel! I—we've got to stop them, Jim!"

Reasoner didn't notice, just then, that she had all at once started calling him by his first name—almost as though there had been a bond of long friendship between them. He was himself too worked up, too heavily prodded by the need for action. "Yeah!" he grunted. "We got to be riding—if it isn't already too late!"

He shoved to his feet. He moved too quickly and a burst of dizziness sent his head spinning; a groan broke from him, he felt himself start to twist and go down. At once, the girl's arm was about him, her soft round body warm against him, supporting him.

"Don't!" Annie York whispered intently. "You can't black out now. You've got to get into that saddle! Do you hear me? Damn you, Jim Reasoner, you've got to!"

She was swearing at him, fiercely. All the York toughness and wildness was in this girl; but strength was in her too, and she imparted some of that strength to him.

His shoulder felt stiff and numb from the bullet gouge; his shirt, he knew, was soaked with the seeping of blood from it. He was lightheaded, the earth seeming to whirl about him so violently that it threatened to twist his feet out from under him. But pride, or something, wouldn't let him show weakness to this brave and fiery girl who had risked her life tonight, saving him from his enemies.

With an effort, Jim Reasoner pulled himself erect. "Where's my bronc?" he mumbled. "Point me toward him, and I'll get in that saddle and stick there all the way to Diamond Wheel!"

But he wondered if he could really do it.

CHAPTER X

CRIB YORK flung up his left arm, with a grunt of warning, and the cavalcade pulled to a quick halt. Hoofs stomping, bit

chains rattling, the saddle horses stood while their riders surveyed the layout of Diamond Wheel, whose lights showed ahead of them in the branches of the big cottonwood, the darkness. Through the swaying bunk house windows winked back at them; and there was a lamp aglow in the parlor of the main house.

"We'll have to make sure of the crew," said the big leader. "Ollie, how about you and Hub Belcher and his two men taking care of that chore? We'll wait for you. Close in quick and quiet—give 'em a chance to give in without a shooting but oblige 'em if they don't feel that way about it."

Belcher, one of the Yorks' tough shirttail neighbors, grunted assent. "Let's go in afoot," he said. "Who's gonna hold the horses?"

Crib quickly assigned that chore to a thick-headed young lout whose slow wit and fumbling movements made him little use for a more important job. "But for the love o' Pete hold 'em!" he added. "You let them critters bolt when the shootin' starts, and find out what happens to you!"

They all dismounted, relinquishing their reins, and starting forward spread out in a skirmish line with guns naked in their hands. They'd emptied a bottle among them, on the ride over from Rocking Y, but the liquor had only served to put a determined meanness in them and hadn't been enough to unsteady their hands. For so many men, they made little noise as they closed in on the unsuspecting ranch.

A couple hundred feet distant, where the darkness was thick Crib York halted and whispered: "All right, Ollie! Move out!"

The four men detached themselves from the line and slunk away—silent shadows, moving toward the bunkhouse. The others hunkered down, to make themselves smaller against the earth, and waited with excitement knotting up inside them. They quickly lost their companions in the darkness and had no way of know-

ing when things would start popping.

In front of them the ranch seemed almost without life. Once, someone moved across the lamp in the ranch house parlor, blacking it out briefly—that was all. There was no sound; a bullbat zoomed off through the night with a startling rush of wings. A horse in the corral whickered, and one of the mounts in their close-held cavvy stirred restlessly and started a movement among the others. Crib York shifted and cursed under his breath. "Can't that idiot keep 'em quiet—?"

A grunt broke from one of his companions. Yonder at the bunkhouse window, a head had lifted into sight above the sill. It poised there a moment, silhouetted blackly, peering in; then it dropped again. After that, more silent waiting—but for a moment only.

Then suddenly the door of the bunkshack went open behind the kick of a cowhide boot. Ollie York shaped up there as he strode across the threshold, his men behind him. A startled exclamation sounded, muffled by the walls of the building, and Ollie's sharp warning command. No more than that. When seconds slid by and no gunshot or sound of conflict broke forth within the bunkhouse, the watchers knew that all was well.

Crib York came to his feet. "That's taken care of!" he whispered. "Now let's go get Shapley, and finish this!"

They went in, running lightly. There were three of them—Crib, and his brother Dale, and Monk Langdon who ran the Rafter L on a herd of some thirty scrawny cattle over at the southern end of the range. They moved past the bunkhouse and the barn without mishap. But then the unforeseen happened.

THE DOOR of the cookshack, near the rear of the main house, swung open suddenly. Light shafted across the yard, and a bowlegged figure in floursack apron came peg-

ging outside carrying a pail of slops. And that lamplight caught Dale York squarely.

Crib had time to think, *Dammit, I forgot about the cook!* Then, dropping his pail with a squawk of alarm the hashlinger spun and had started back for the safety of his kitchen. He probably had a gun there. Dale York cursed and said, "No, you don't!" and dropped the hammer on his leveled sixshooter, in a quick slapping shot.

That mishap broke up the play. The cook went down, in a sprawl, just across the open door sill. But the warning had been given and next instant the lamp within the house was snuffed out. A window creaked open; Matt Harbin's voice called: "What's going on?"

Crib spotted the window and he flipped a shot at it, lefthanded; the glass of the upper pane went out with a smash—he had aimed too high. He turned on his brother, then. "You played hell, you did!"

"What do you mean?" Dale York bellowed. "That cook seen me. He was headin' for a gun..."

Now the bunkhouse door opened again and Ollie came hurrying, Hub Belcher and one of the other men at his heels. "You run into trouble?" Ollie York panted.

Crib said, "Yeah! What about them crew hands?"

"They're all disarmed and lined against the wall. All five of 'em. Perry can handle 'em."

"Good! That leaves Harbin and Shapley, in the house. Let's split—half take the front way, half the rear. Grab that pair inside before they can put up a fight..."

Crib himself led the assault on the rear of the house. The door was unlocked and he kicked it open, ran spike-heeled across a small, screened-in stoop. There was a second, family kitchen, little used since Shapley's wife died and he had started eating his meals in the mess shack with the hands. Beyond that room another door stood open, with a faint light showing beyond.

Charging it recklessly, Crib and

his men crossed a narrow hallway and the living room lay before them. A cottonwood log was burning in the deep stone fireplace and though the lamp had been extinguished this gave off light enough to outline every object in the room.

Against a wall stood Walt Shapley, a helpless and frightened figure. And, opposite the hall entrance, old Matt Harbin whirled from jarring home the heavy bolt that locked the big front door. With one hand still on the bolt and the other weighted by a long-barreled Colt, he stared at the intruders—too late to risk a bullet against the guns that had him covered.

"Hold it!" Crib York gritted.

He strode into the room, his gun unwavering in his left hand. His right arm hung at an odd angle, the elbow permanently crooked by the slug with which Jim Reasoner had crippled it. The snapping flames of the fireplace glinted an evil reflection from his gloating black eyes.

There wasn't any resistance either of the old men could offer. Crib walked straight to Matt Harbin, picked the gun from his fingers and tossed it onto a chair.

At that moment, heavy feet struck the porch outside. Crib said across his shoulder to one of the men who had entered with him, "Get that lamp going again, will you?" Then, shoving Harbin roughly to one side, he threw back the bolt and jerked the big door open. "Come on in!"

DALE YORK, together with Hub Belcher and Belcher's rider, burst into the room, to find Crib already in command of things. The lamp had been lighted again and as the chimney was replaced the light steadied, spread across the grim faces of the men who seemed to fill the room to overflowing.

"What are you doing here?" Walt Shapley demanded, in a voice that trembled as much from fury as from fear. The Easterner's face was dead white; he looked frail indeed, confronting the giant Yorks, his thin white hands lifted shoulder high.

"It ain't a social call, that's certain," Crib York jeered at him. "Though we're the last callers you ever will have!"

"Our crew!" Matt Harbin blurted in sudden horror. "Where are they? What have you done to 'em?"

Crib told him, "The cook is dead, I reckon. The rest of 'em are lined up against a wall of the bunkhouse, keeping out of trouble—with a gun trained on them. They'll stay there until we decide otherwise."

"Biscuits is dead?" the foreman echoed, hoarsely. "I'll see you hang for that—all of you!"

"I don't reckon! There's gonna be a hangin', all right—but all of it you'll see will be the rope when it's put around your neck!"

"Where's your hired gunslinger now, Shapley?" Ollie York gloated. "Where's this Jim Reasoner you been throwing against us, to keep us off of you? A bad time for him to turn up missing! He's had you so sure you could get by with your thievery that you don't even try to cover up any more. A bad mistake!"

Walt Shapley said, coldly, "I'd like to know just what you're talking about!"

"Then I'll tell you! We're talking about a Diamond Wheel calf—trailing a cow with our Rockin' Y brand on it!"

"You're lying!" cried Matt Harbin. "Produce 'em—if you can!"

"They're in our corral," said the oldest of the Yorks. "And they'll stay there, in case anyone needs justification for what we're about to do!"

Hub Belcher broke in: "To blazes with all this palaver! What are we stalling for? That big cottonwood in the yard has a branch that'll hold these two, just dandy!"

There was a chorus of agreement. Crib York shrugged. "All right," he grunted. "You heard him. Outside—both of you!"

Protesting, but helpless in the hands of their enemies, the two old men suddenly found themselves being herded through the door and down the veranda steps, stumbling

under the prodding of gun muzzles and shoving hands.

Somebody said, "There's a coil of new rope on my saddle."

Crib York cupped hands to his mouth and shouted to the hair-lipped kid who'd been left with the horses: "Bring 'em in! Ollie," he added, "go fetch those guys out of the bunkhouse, so they can watch this. It'll be a good object lesson. Afterwards, we'll let 'em have until daylight to be out of this valley. The last running iron has burnt the last Diamond Wheel onto beef that didn't belong to it!"

There was a few moments' delay while these orders were carried out. The cavvy was brought clattering into the yard; the Diamond Wheel crew was prodded from the bunk shack, hands raised, horror in them at sight of the two old men who stood on the bench beneath the cottonwood, hands tied behind them now.

A COUPLE of saddle ropes had been uncoiled and were being thrown up across a stout limb of the big tree. Dale York grabbed the end of one of them and began fashioning a noose, with deft sure movements of his big hands as he worked by the light that fell from the windows of the big house.

He dangled the finished loop in front of Walt Shapley's scared, set features. "Ever see one of these close up before?" he grunted. "I don't reckon so, at that. Probably, where you come from, justice ain't direct and sure, like it is out here. Money enough can buy your way out of anything. But not out of this noose!"

"Listen to me!" Walt Shapley blurted, then. His voice was rimmed with terror but his head was up, his frail shoulders squared back as he stared at death only moments away from him. "If you're determined to hang somebody, you've got me—so let Matt Harbin go! Allow him the same chance as the rest of my riders, to be out of the valley by sunup. I swear to you that Matt isn't guilty of anything. He was like the others—he was only on the payroll. Isn't

one killing enough to satisfy you?"

A look ran among the captors; then big Crib shook his bearded head, unyielding.

"No, one ain't enough! We savvy this foreman of yours, Shapley! You're no cowman! You own the iron, maybe, but it was him put it on our cattle. And he ain't gonna get out of paying for his share of the dirty work—he ain't gonna ride away from here so as to dab his greedy loop on some other rangel!"

His statement was final. Shapley saw the uselessness of further argument and fell silent. But Matt Harbin turned to his friend and spoke quietly. "Thanks for trying, boss! I've always said, you were a stubborn old cuss in some ways—but I never worked for a squarer one!"

Then the words broke off, as a loop was pulled roughly down over his head and the rope tightened, snug against his throat, the bulky hangman's knot pressing beneath his left ear.

Crib York inspected both the ropes, stepped back. "All right!" he told his followers. "When I give you the signal, Ollie, kick that bench the heck out from under them. We'll leave 'em hang awhile, afterwards," he added. "Let that spineless Tremont have a look at what it's like. He'll be the new owner of Diamond Wheel, I guess, but put a good enough scare in him and I doubt he'll ever give us trouble!"

He reached up to pull off his hat, to make the signal....and at that moment the group beneath the cottonwood became aware of drumming hoofbeats rocking in off the bunch grass flats.

"What the—" Cursing, Crib York whirled to stare into the darkness, left hand dropping toward his gun. Somebody cried, "Whoever it is, they're comin' hell-for-leather!"

Then, as the riders swept into the yard, a man bawled: "Reasoner!"

More than one gun swept up, ready to trigger. Above the clatter of hoofs and drift of yard dust, Jim Reasoner's voice sounded: "Put a stop to this! It's the greatest mistake you'll ever make!"

C RIB YORK, swearing and furious, got a look at him then through the lamp-splashed dust, and swung his gun up left-handed. But before he could get his aim another figure crossed his sights.

Next moment Annie York was pulling her bronc to a rearing halt in front of her brother and, leaning from saddle, she knocked his hand down with her riding quirt. "Stop it! Stop it!" she screamed. And: "Thank God—we're in time!"

"Hold your guns, the lot of you!" Jim Reasoner was shouting. He had quieted his lathered sorrel and his gun was out, "Hang these men and you'll never stop regretting it! They're innocent—Diamond Wheel is innocent. You've been tricked by Sim Bogart. And we're here to prove it!"

Violence trembled on a taut, thin leash. Ollie York shouted heavily, "You couldn't prove nothing to me, Reasoner!"

"Probably not—but there's your own sister. You'll have to believe her, won't you? Annie knows the truth. Let her tell you!"

They all looked at the girl, confused and dangerous but at least waiting to hear her explanation. And, without dismounting from her blowing bronc, she spilled it out to them. "It was Franks who misbranded that calf and put it where you'd find it!" she insisted. "I heard him, myself, brag that he'd done it—at Bogart's orders!"

"Where's Franks now?" someone wanted to know.

"Dead, I think," Jim Reasoner answered. "As dead as bullets can make him! Except for Annie, it would have been me instead. And you gents would have finished your work here, and everything been settled the way Sim Bogart wanted it!"

His words left a stunned and thoughtful silence, for a moment. Then Crib York muttered, slowly, "Bogart! There's little I'd put past him, but I don't rightly understand this. What's he got to do with us, and with wantin' Shapley dead?"

"It's a big-scale rustling ring,"

Reasoner answered. "With Bogart at the head and Diamond Wheel being used as a front and a scapegoat. That much I know—the rest, I aim to find out before this night is over!"

"For now, put your guns away and take the ropes off these two! Thank your stars you didn't manage to finish this thing and hang a pair of honest men who never did harm to you, or to anyone else! After that," Jim Reasoner added, "we'll make war talk!"

CHAPTER XI

THE OLD biscuit-shooter wasn't dead. Ollie York's bullet had made a clean hole through him, without internal bleeding, and his pulse was strong, his breathing steady. The hell-roaring York brothers, strangely quieted now at the nearness their whiskey-polished rage had led them to tremendous error, seemed really glad to learn this news.

Ollie and Crib, themselves, picked up the hurt man and carried him in to lay him gently on his cot in the mess shack, and Crib told Annie sternly, "You stay with the old man, you hear, and do everything you can for him. We-uns will send the medico out from town."

She retorted, indignantly, "I'm going to town with you! You can't leave me behind at a time like this!"

But Crib pointed a massive finger at the still form on the cot, and repeated, "You're staying! That old fellow needs lookin' after—and what's gonna happen in town is nothin' for you to take part in!" He turned around and strode solidly out of the room, then, and Annie must have decided he was right. At least, she didn't argue any more with him.

She insisted, though, on taking over the rough-and-ready job that Matt Harbin was doing, with bandaging materials and some potent kind of frontier antiseptic, on Jim Reasoner's shoulder wound. You would hardly have believed there

could have been such tenderness in that wild York girl as when she bent over the work, her red lower lip sucked in between her teeth, her pretty eyes clouded at the pain she knew she was causing him.

The bleeding had stopped, and Reasoner had already overcome the first weakening shock of the wound and from the effects of the gunbarrel clout against his skull. But that bullet crease in his shoulder was hurting and the horse liniment burnt like fire in raw, torn flesh. Beard-stubbed, bloody, he sat on a chair in the cook shack and endured the agony of it, and summoned his strength for the rest of tonight's unfinished business that still lay ahead.

For, with the Yorks and their neighbors in their present mood, a final settlement of this business could not be allowed to wait; Reasoner himself, despite his bodily weariness, also wanted to bring the thing to a quick close—before Sim Bogart could learn of the misfiring of his plans.

Inside half an hour after the interrupted hanging under the big cottonwood, a cavalcade was in saddle and spurring toward Rimrock town. The combined forces of Shapley's men and those who had come with the Yorks made a good-sized body of riders, and hoofsound that rolled loud across the dark and silent bunch grass swells.

When the lights of town twinkled ahead, Jim Reasoner called a halt and a council of war.

"Let's not go larruping into this," he said. "There's a couple of points have to be cleaned up first... Matt, I want you with me. The rest split up and drift into town, quiet. Stake out where you can keep an eye on the Seven-Up, and wait for me to give the signal; and Walt," he added, turning to Shapley, "since you insisted on coming I want you especially to keep out of sight. It could ruin everything for you to be seen." The old man nodded agreement.

Even Crib York had no objections to letting Jim Reasoner run the show. He said, "We'll play the hand your way, mister." Reasoner picked up the reins then, jerked his head to Matt Harbin.

"Let's go!"

"Where we headed?" Matt wanted to know, as he fell in beside his friend.

"For Tremont's office. Unless I've added the thing wrong, he's the key figure."

"Tremont?" the other echoed, startled. "How in blazes do you make that out?"

Reasoner pointed out, "He would have inherited, had anything happened to Shapley tonight, wouldn't he?"

"Well, sure, but—holy smoke, Jim! The youngster just couldn't be the kind of a varmint who'd want to see that done to the old man. I'd swear to it!"

Reasoner said only, "I'd like to think you're right, Matt. Maybe we'll find out in a minute or two. Let's just hope we find him in!"

YES, A LAMP glowed behind pulled shades, in Paul Tremont's second-floor law office windows. The two men racked their horses at the hitching pole before the darkened store building, crossed the planking and started up the musty stairs.

At Tremont's door they halted a moment, listening. Little sound came from beyond the panel, but Reasoner thought he caught the scratching of a pen, and once Tremont's tortured, rheumy cough broke sharply upon the stillness, to be quickly muffled against the folds of a handkerchief.

Reasoner found the doorknob, twisted it. The door went open beneath his hand.

At his desk, young Tremont jerked up his head with a wild and startled look, a trapped exclamation bursting from him at the suddenness of their entering. The pen dropped from his white fingers, rolled across

the desk and clattered thinly to the floor.

"What's the matter?" asked Reasoner, walking into the room with Matt Harbin at his heels. "Something startled you?"

Tremont found his tongue. "Didn't you ever learn better than to walk through a door without knocking?" His voice was harsh, highpitched.

"Sorry. I had something else on my mind, and I didn't think about it."

Blandly, Reasoner met the other man's angry stare until Tremont broke gaze. The lawyer looked down at the papers in front of him—and hastily picked up a paper, moved it to cover the writing he had been doing when the door opened.

"Well, what do you want?" he demanded, looking up again at his visitors.

Reasoner quirked an eyebrow. "Your own manners are kind of strange, fellow. Last time I saw you, you were stepping all over yourself to buy me drinks; now you don't even talk civil. Something must be gravelling you."

"No, it's nothing." Tremont forced a better control of himself. He pushed his chair back, opened a drawer of the desk. "Let me get this stuff cleared out of the way and we'll have a glass—"

"Not quite so fast!" Reasoner made a silent step forward and placed his hand on the papers as the lawyer moved to sweep them into the drawer. "I'll just take a look at this—"

"The devil you will!"

The chair toppled behind Tremont as he leaped to his feet, trying to wrest the papers from under the other's fingers. His bony face had turned mottled with the blood rushing into it. "Give me that! You have no right..."

Reasoner's stare met his, coldly. "Best keep an eye on him, Matt. He might have a stingy gun somewhere!" Then, as Paul Tremont glared with a weak rage, he calmly picked from the scatter on the desk

the paper that the lawyer had tried to cover up. A glance told him its story; grimly, he passed the paper over to his friend.

"Take a look, Matt!"

IT WAS A bill of sale for five hundred head of Diamond Wheel cattle, made out to Edward Pender of Crystal Springs. At the bottom of the sheet, its ink not yet dry, was the half-completed signature of Walt Shapley.

"So forging the bills of sale was your part of the game," murmured Reasoner, his look stabbing into that of the stammering Tremont. He picked up another paper, scanned it briefly, passed it on to Matt Harbin. It was an old letter of Shapley's. "Better keep that one, too, Matt. The signature was his model."

The old foreman looked from one to another of the papers, comparing the forged writing with the original, his weather-beaten face scowling. He said, finally, "Who's this Edward Pender?"

"The fence, of course. The man who got rid of the stolen beef Sim Bogart's running iron artists converted to the Diamond Wheel brand. A very ingenious setup. But how proud of yourself does it make you, Tremont, to have had a part in doing this—to a man who loved you as much as if you'd been his own flesh-and-blood kin?"

His last words were a whipstroke lashing the man's mottled features; they stung an angry scream out of Tremont.

"Hang you! What I did was no harm to Walt Shapley! We stole nothing from him; we only used the brand, without his knowledge. It made no difference where he was concerned!"

"Oh, didn't it!" Matt Harbin snapped.

Reasoner stopped him with a look. "Let the man talk. Let's hear all his excuses..."

"All right, so maybe I haven't any excuse!" cried Paul Tremont. Near to hysteria, the words were pouring from him now. "I told you once, in this very room, that you were drink-

ing liquor with a rotten, yellow coward! Didn't you ever wonder just why I drank so much—keeping myself in a drunken stupor where I couldn't feel so much the bite of my conscience? It's because I've been afraid! Scared stiff at the thought of standing up to Sim Bogart, and telling him to go to blazes!"

Reasoner considered him narrowly. "And just what is Bogart's hold? What keeps you tied to him?"

The man shrugged thin shoulders, fire draining suddenly out of him as his eyes dropped before Reasoner's probing stare. "It wasn't so much to start with—some debts I'd got into, playing cards at the Seven-Up. I've found out since that they were crooked cards, but that doesn't change anything—not with Bogart!"

"One night, not long after Walt Shapley and my mother moved out to this country, he came to my office and brought Grady Franks with him. Franks was new in the valley; the very first night he'd killed a man and everyone was scared of him. And Bogart threatened that he'd turn him loose on me unless I agreed to follow orders. Do as I was told, however, and I could redeem my IOU's; and he promised that no harm would result—to me, or to Shapley."

Reasoner prompted him: "And what were the orders?"

"First, I had to see to it that Shapley adopted the Diamond Wheel for his brand. That was easy enough. I did it through my mother, because he'd accept any suggestion that came from her; and when she died only a few weeks afterward, all hades couldn't have persuaded him to change it. As soon as that was settled, Grady Franks set to work re-branding small bunches of valley beef and pushing them out through the rim, while I was given the further job of fixing up the phony bills of sale for them. I kept thinking, all along, there would be an end to the thing, but—there never was. There was no end at all!"

"Of course not!" Jim Reasoner snapped. "As soon as you set your

pen to a single one of those forged bills, they had you! You were sewed in as deep as the rest of them, and you were helpless to quit or say a word to stop it!"

PAUL TREMONT had sunk into his chair, elbows on the desk. Now he dropped his face into his hands, in tired agony. He ran trembling, bony fingers through lifeless hair.

"What could I have done?" he protested. "With Bogart after me—and Franks... After awhile Grady Franks and the bunch of owlhooters he'd assembled got reckless and began cutting too deep into the valley herds. They'd gone easy at first, picking their beef carefully and working so slowly that it was months before the other ranchers began to notice any leakage from their herds. But finally the talking started.

"Bogart said I needn't worry. They had their organization built up now and Franks had been instructed henceforth to leave the local ranchers alone. There were close to two dozen brands, scattered through the Territory, that could be converted to a Diamond Wheel; they were going to go after them instead, on a big scale. They'd bring them in and work them over in the hills, occasionally putting them with Shapley's herds to feed while Pender arranged the unloading. Bregman, and the Yorks, and the other local ranchers had so far done nothing more than talk; and since there wouldn't be any further stealing from them, the local hard feelings would blow over. So Bogart still insisted nothing could happen to Walt Shapley."

"He did, huh?" Matt Hardin cut in bleakly. "A storm the size of the one he'd raised couldn't be made to blow over that easy—just by calling a halt to rustling valley beef. The damage was already done!"

Matt turned to Jim Reasoner. "That's what you were hinting at that day on round-up, wasn't it? You pointed out that Lewt Bregman's calf crop was normal for the number of she-stuff he had left; that his

shortages were in the mature cattle—the twos and three-year-olds. You figured the actual thieving must have come to a halt some time up to six months or a year ago.

"But a man like Bregman wouldn't stop to figure that out. His range count was low and he meant somebody to pay for it. The Yorks, the same way. And the payoff was what happened at the ranch, tonight!"

Tremont's head jerked up sharply. "What happened tonight?"

"Your stepfather nearly got his neck stretched on a York saddle rope, is all!" Harbin threw at him. "Only Reasoner, here, saved him. Me, too!" The old ramrod felt of his scrawny throat. "I can still feel that hemp sawin' at my gullet..."

Paul Tremont had groped to his feet, clinging to the edge of the desk as he stared, horror-stricken, at the pair of them. "You—you don't mean it! After all the time that's passed without a blow-up—why tonight?"

"Because Sim Bogart intended it!" Reasoner answered, coldly. "He deliberately planted a misbranded Rocking Y calf where it would be found and send the Yorks and their friends over to clean out Diamond Wheel and kill Walt Shapley! How does this figure into the story you've been telling us? How does it square with Bogart's promise that Shapley wouldn't be hurt?"

For a moment, as the man absorbed this terrible news, staring in stunned bewilderment from one to another of his visitors, there was no sound—none but the harsh rasp of the consumptive's harsh breathing. Then, slowly, Tremont turned—and started directly toward the door.

"Hey! Where's he goin'?" Matt Harbin exclaimed. And added, in startling realization: "If he tries to brace Sim Bogart, he'll get himself killed!"

Jim Reasoner laid a hand on his friend's arm. "Let him alone! He wants for once to try a man's role. We've got to let him. And back him up, when it comes to the show-down!"

He stepped to the window, looked past the shade into the street below until he saw Tremont emerge from the building entrance and turn with a purposeful stride in the direction of the Seven-Up, half a block away.

Then, dropping the shade into place, Reasoner heeled about with a crisp nod to the old cowman. "Come on, fellow! This is the clean-up!"

CHAPTER XII

THE SEVEN-UP, where it stood at the crossing of the town's two principal streets, made a considerable splash of light that poured through its two levels of windows. For a week-night, trade was brisk. Tied horses stood along the hitch racks flanking both wings of the wide, roofed-over gallery, and a raucous hubbub of voices came out through the open batwings, and upon the mild spring evening.

Keeping a dozen yards behind young Tremont, the two from Diamond Wheel matched his purposeful stride as he swung along the dark boardwalk. At the edge of the dusty intersection, however, Reasoner halted his friend. "Wait! Don't crowd him!"

They waited and let Tremont move across the ruts, into the wash of light from the saloon. His thin shape had an erect, determined set to it as he went up the steps, silhouetting himself against the double doors set into the corner of the building. They saw him push open one of the swinging panels, then pause like that for just a moment—whether searching the big room beyond, or feeling a qualm of hesitation, it would be hard to say. But it was for a moment only; then he had stepped through the door and vanished, and as the batwings fanned empty space Jim Reasoner grunted, "All right!"

Reaching the bottom of the steps he paused, turning for a long, slow look over the dark street. In the opening between two store buildings across from him, he thought he

caught a hint of movement. Nearer, in a darkened doorway, a stray glint of lamplight touched a man's belt buckle as he shifted position. Jim Reasoner nodded, satisfied. The stake-out was prepared; his men were in position for the signal whenever it came.

But then, as he heeled about to mount the steps, his glance fell upon one of the horses in the line-up before the saloon, and froze there. He knew that claybank gelding. It belonged to Gimp Mays!

Above him Matt Harbin was waiting, with an impatient scowl. "What's the matter?"

"Mays is here," Reasoner told him. "The leader of Bogart's rustling crew. Likely the rest are with him, reporting to the boss. And if they are, the fireworks could start the minute I stick my head in that door!"

He crossed to the entrance, took a cautious survey of the big room over the top of the batwings. He recognized none of the rimrock gang among the crowd, but this didn't satisfy him. Not quite all of the saloon was visible from this doorway.

Two bartenders were on duty. Card games, with house dealers working the banks, were operating at certain of the round-topped gaming tables. Yonder, at the bar, Reasoner spotted young Tremont in the act of questioning one of the barkeepers; he saw the latter's jerk of head toward Sim Bogart's private office that was at the opposite side of the room, just beneath the stairs to the upper gallery. Tremont nodded stiffly, turned to move in that direction.

Jim Reasoner gripped Matt's elbow. "Get inside! Keep an eye on the office entrance, and don't let anyone but Tremont go through if you can help it!"

The other started a question, but there was no answer. Reasoner had whirled from him and was already heading away at a run along one wing of the dark veranda.

He had noticed a side door and a lighted window, and he figured these must open directly into the

office; but reaching them he was chagrined to learn that the shade stood flush with the sill so that it was impossible to see inside. He waited a moment, debating—and heard the sudden slam of a door, with angry force behind it. Hard on the heels of this sound there came Paul Tremont's voice, high-pitched and near hysteria.

BEFORE he had got out a dozen words Sim Bogart's deeper tones broke in. Even pressing an ear against the door panel, he could not make out the rumbling speech; but it ended in a laugh, curt and sneering. And this seemed to lash Tremont to a pitch of fury.

"You've put me off for the last time, Bogart! Now I want an answer—and I want the truth! Did you send the Yorks against Diamond Wheel tonight?"

"All right, I did!" This time, Bogart's voice was loud and plain enough. "With Reasoner gone off somewhere, they should have made short work of him by this time. And you, as the heir to Diamond Wheel, will sell the ranch to me—for the amount of the notes I hold against you!"

"That settled, there'll be no danger, now or ever again, of this organization of mine being blown out of the water! Not even Jim Reasoner will be any threat to me." He added, with that same, scornful laugh. "Don't tell me *you've* got any idea of stopping me—you that's hardly even a man—!"

The laugh sheered off abruptly, in alarm. "Why, you crazy fool! Don't try—!"

Almost before the shot came, Reasoner was hurling the weight of his shoulder against the panel. The door was not locked. It gave under his lunge, to smash hard against the wall. He caught his balance with gun lifting and searching for a target, his ears shocked by the concussion of a sixshooter speaking within the confinement of small space.

Then, he saw Sim Bogart, facing him across the tiny room. But in between, back turned to Reasoner, Paul

Tremont stood with his body drawn up tautly, his shoulders humped and head pulled forward as though in a spasm of extreme agony. Slowly the young man began to crumple; his knees gave way, and he went twisting down. As he fell, a small-caliber revolver slipped from his hand, still unfired; he had just managed to get it from his pocket, but no more than that.

Sim Bogart was left staring at Reasoner across the crumpled body of the man he had shot, smoke from a sixgun curling up into his scowling, startled face. Quickly enough, he overcame his first surprise. His mouth twisted; the hammer of his gun started to rise even as Jim Reasoner's finger stiffened on the trigger of his own weapon.

But it was another gun that spoke. Belatedly Reasoner glimpsed the man who stood yonder with his back pressed against the wall and a sixshooter leveled. And the bullet Gimp Mays hurled at him, smashing into the echoes of the first explosion, drilled the edge of the door at Reasoner's elbow.

Startled, he pulled off target and so missed his shot at Bogart. But as the saloon man's Colt spoke a second time Reasoner was already in motion, leaping back to the safety of the dark veranda. Bogart's lead drilled emptiness. Pressed flat against the rough siding, Reasoner shoved his gun past the edge of the door and sent a shot into the room.

Immediately one of those within triggered at his briefly-glimpsed figure; splinters leaped, and he pulled back again hastily.

He was dimly conscious now of the yells of startled men, breaking loose within the main room of the saloon beyond the flimsy office partition. In the lamp-splashed street, too, men were shouting, and boots hitting the dust. That, he knew, would be the Yorks and the Diamond Wheel crew, answering the summons of gunfire.

Gimp Mays was crying hoarsely. "The lamp! Put out the lamp, Chief! Damn thing has us targeted like a

shootin' gallery, and him out there in the dark—"

THERE WAS the clink of the glass chimney, but before Bogart could carry out the suggestion Reasoner launched himself recklessly into the opening.

He had a blurred picture of the saloon man bending over the lamp on the desk, a hand cupped above it as he blew; and of the stoop-shouldered, red-bearded figure of Mays, with gun leveled directly at the door. Then the light flickered out, but with that picture etched upon his retina he hit trigger, firing at the remembered image of Gimp Mays.

The outlaw released his Colt-hammer at the same instant; twin red flashes lit the cubby hole of a room for the space of a heartbeat. Reasoner felt the heat of the muzzle flame. But he knew instinctively that his own shot had gone dead center, even before hearing the sound of agony that broke from Mays, and the heavy thud of his falling.

He was still in motion, leaping sideward. Otherwise, the quenching of the light would have caught him silhouetted against the faint illumination of street light beyond the open door. As it was he moved none too quickly. Barely had he cleared the entrance when Bogart's weapon spoke, laying a string of powder-spark across the dark. Sim Bogart's panting curse sounded at the miss.

Out of the shadows, Jim Reasoner spoke softly, taunting him. "Mays is dead, Bogart; I'll take you next. You're all alone, Bogart. Nobody's going to come and help you—none of your killers or bouncers or bodyguards. Listen a minute. You'll see they've got their hands full!"

There was confusion beyond the office partition—yells, and pounding feet, and now the sudden firing of a gun. "You hear?" demanded Reasoner. "That's the Yorks—and Diamond Wheel. They've learned about the frameup you tried to pull on them tonight. They know all about the rimrock hideout, and Ed Pender, and the rest of it; and they've come here

for the clean-up. But me, Bogart—I'm tending to you personally!"

He drew another curse, and a rope of gunflame stabbing for him in the dark. But Sim Bogart was rattled, no longer sure of his enemy's position. The shot didn't even come close. And Reasoner, crouched against the baseboard of the wall below the window, answered with a taunting chuckle. He held his fire while the tumultuous sounds of battle raged beyond the partition.

Within the office itself, now, there was only the stink of gunsmoke, the echoes of ear-punishing gunfire confined at close quarters, and the hoarse breathing of the saloon man. Jim Reasoner, waiting, thought of Paul Tremont lying dead between him and the desk, and mingled with his hatred of Sim Bogart was a stabbing touch of self-blame.

He had goaded the young fellow to this effort, and had then stood back and let him walk to meet his doom. It was little comfort to reflect that Paul Tremont might have preferred to die like this—like a man—than to have faced a charge of forgery and been put away behind bars, where prison damp and his own broken health soon would have combined to kill him. At any rate, Jim Reasoner swore to himself that Sim Bogart would pay the full punishment for his murder....

HIS EARS caught a creak of floorboards, the slur of cloth brushing wood. Tensing, he listened and tried to interpret the meaning of these stealthy sounds. Bogart had regained control of his breathing now and, obscured by the racket filling the big room next door, all sounds were deceptive in that narrow darkness. He could not decipher what the man was up to.

Then there was a sudden scrambling of footsteps, and the door leading to the barroom swung violently open. Tumult washed in, on a shaft of light that streaked across the office floor. And, against that opening, Sim Bogart's fleeing shape was framed briefly as he lunged through.

Quickly, Reasoner went scam-

bling after him. But as luck would have it, in getting to his feet he set one boot inadvertently on Gimp Mays' dead hand and it threw him off stride, so that his hurt shoulder slammed hard against the wall. A groan burst from him. When he pushed away from the wall, he felt pouring in on him an alarming recurrence of the dizziness that had all but laid him out, earlier in the evening.

And he saw that Bogart had got away from him.

He reached the door, held up there for a moment while he clutched at the sill and hunted for his man through the confusion of the room beyond. It was a general melee. At the first signal of gunfire, the Yorks and Diamond Wheel had struck that place from every entrance, with fists and guns.

Yonder, big Crib York had a broken chair leg clubbed in his one good fist and was laying about with it, his wild shaggy head tilted back, bearded mouth open on roaring battle cries. Reasoner caught a glimpse of Matt Harbin, ensconced behind an overturned gaming table in a litter of cards and chips and trading bullets with two of Gimp Mays' rim-rock crew, while bystanders stampered out of the line of fire. All through the big room, Bogart's housemen were putting up a battle; but they couldn't stand against such determined foes as these.

Then he caught sight of Bogart, himself.

Finding every exit blocked, the big man had taken the only remaining route of flight. He had turned toward the stairs that climbed to the second story gallery and was already half way up them, running hard, two steps at a time. Doors opened off the balcony, and a corridor leading toward the rear of the building. Probably there would be a rear stairway by which Bogart intended to make his escape.

Jim Reasoner knew suddenly that he lacked the strength, in his sore and bullet-torn body, to give chase. The room seemed to rock dizzily about him. The stairs loomed, for-

biddingly steep, impossible to climb. He halted at the bottom of them, and lifted his smoking gun.

"Bogart!" he shouted.

His voice could not carry above the tumult of fighting behind him. So he fired, once—a warning shot. The bullet smashed into the hand-rail, close to Bogart. It served its purpose, of halting him and forcing him to turn and defend himself.

Bogart half stumbled on the narrow stairs, caught himself with quick footwork and a hand grabbing the railing. His back against it, he looked down at Reasoner; and Reasoner saw the man's face dark with hatred and fear, hair plastered to sweaty forehead, his expensive clothing disarranged. For a split second they faced each other, unmindful of the fighting going on below them. Then Sim Bogart whipped his gun across his body, triggering.

Without haste, Reasoner flipped up the muzzle of his own weapon, let the hammer drop. He knew the shot would be good even before he felt the buck of hot gunmetal against his hard palm. It was with little emotion that he saw Bogart jerk convulsively, his own bullet thrown wide. The saloon man reeled.

Then, very slowly, Sim Bogart bent forward at the waist; slowly, he took off from the head of the steps in a jackknifing dive. He turned over twice, spilling down them, and ended in a limp and grotesque sprawl at Reasoner's feet. Smoking gun still dragging from his hand, Jim Reasoner put his other hand against the wall to steady him, and looked down at the man he had killed.

CHAPTER XIII

RIMROCK'S only doctor was a mild-tempered little man, whose pose of cantankerous sour disposition fooled no one. Finished binding up a bloody bullet furrow in Dale York's gaunt cheek, he turned for a look around the room at the other work waiting for him and shook his head, scowling.

"You don't care if I never get to bed tonight, do you?" he grumbled.

"The mass slaughter and mayhem you let loose over at the Seven-Up will take me a month to patch up—not counting them that the undertaker will have to find room for in the cemetery. And you tell me Shapley's biscuit-shooter is waitin' for me to look at him, out at Diamond Wheel. How in blazes do you expect any one man—?"

From the door, Matt Harbin grinned at him. Matt had come through the saloon blow-up without a scratch on his tough old hide. He said, "Simmer down, Doc. I reckon Biscuits can wait until tomorrow. The bullet made a clean hole and we got him fixed up good enough—likely as good as a certain renegade horse doctor I know of could have done it. So, come off your haunches and get to work on these boys as are needin' you!"

"I'll just bet you've got the poor old man fixed!" the doctor snarled at him. "What with that blamed hoss liniment you put on everything from a bad tooth to a snake bite. Still," he added grudgingly, "I reckon it'll do the trick; and you got Annie York to keep the dressings clean. I'll be out tomorrow and look at him, if I don't hear before then that inflammation has set in."

Matt Harbin said, "Okay, Doc. Can I see young Tremont now?"

"Yeah, but I think he's resting. His father and Jim Reasoner are in there with him. Just walk in."

He jerked his head toward a door. Matt said, "Thanks, Doc," and crossed the office. As he opened the door, the medico was saying, "All right, who's next here? Belcher, looks like you're bleedin' the wust. Get up, York, and let him sit down and be worked on—ain't got all night for this!" The closing of the door shut away his grumbling voice.

In a tiny cubicle of a room, with white-washed walls and no other furniture but an iron cot, a small table, a couple chairs, Walt Shapley sat at the bedside of his stepson. Young Tremont's face was as deathly white as the pillow beneath him; he seemed pathetically frail and defenseless, seen this way—sleeping, his mask of

cynicism slipped from him.

At first glance, he struck Matt Harbin as the deadest-looking live man he had ever laid eyes on, and the thought prompted him to ask, in alarm, "He still kicking?"

"Yes," Shapley answered, without taking his eyes from the bony, pallid features. "The doctor says the bullet missed any vital spot. He says the boy will live—that he'll live a long time, in this climate, and even get over the worst of his cough, if he'll just give his system a chance and quit aggravating the illness with drinking. I've always tried to tell him that, but he wouldn't listen. I had the feeling that he didn't particularly care if he lived, or not..."

Jim Reasoner said quietly, from his chair that was tilted back against the wall, "I think maybe he'll feel differently now. I think maybe, after this night's doings, he'll figure he's got a thing or two to live for."

"But—?" Matt looked at his friend sharply, caught the slight shake of Reasoner's head. At the warning, he swallowed what he was about to say, and finished with something entirely different. "I reckon you'll stay in town till morning, Walt?"

THE OLD MAN nodded. "I'll stay as long as I'm needed—as long as it takes the boy to pull over the worst hump. Then, when he's able, I'm going to have him moved out to the ranch. It should do him good."

"Yeah," said Matt. "Well, I'll leave one of the boys in town, in case you need him for anything. Me and the rest of the crew, I think we'd best be getting back. The York girl is alone, there, takin' care of Biscuits; it's time somebody spelled her."

"You're right, Matt," the old man said. "I'll get along here. You'd better go on."

"I'll ride with you," Jim Reasoner put in, and letting his chair forward silently eased to his feet.

Matt gave him a look that was full of concern. "You think you're able to ride?"

"Oh, sure. I've had some rest, and the doc fixed me up. And I don't

want to stay in town."

His friend saw the stubborn set of his mind, and didn't argue further. "Come along then. If I have to hold you in the saddle myself, we'll get you there..."

Jim Reasoner, however, was recuperated from the hurts he had received, and the crisp night ride to Diamond Wheel seemed to take no toll from him. In fact, he set a steady pace for the other members of the crew.

There was something Matt Harbin wanted to discuss with his friend but it was not easy to talk in saddle, and with the rest of the Shapley riders about them. He bided his time, until they had clattered into the ranch yard. There he ordered one of the hands to take care of his own horse and Reasoner's, and told a second one: "Take charge of the cook, and tell Annie York that everything's turned out all right in town. Jim and I have matters to talk about."

Under the big cottonwood, the two friends faced each other. Jim Reasoner said, "Well, Matt?"

"I reckon you know what's on my mind. Young Tremont—"

Reasoner nodded soberly. "I know what you mean. I shut you up when you started to mention it in front of the old man—I thought we'd better discuss it alone first."

"What's to happen to him, Jim?"

"I dunno. He's weak; he's made some terrible blunders, and until things came to a head this evening he lacked the courage to face up to them and try to right the wrong he'd done. Tonight, though, he finally grew up. And I think, for that, he deserves another chance."

"But what will the law have to say? Those forgeries—"

"Who knows about them—except for us? Bogart, Mays, Grady Franks—they're all of them dead. We still have the fence in Crystal Springs to settle with, but I doubt that he knew anything about Tremont's part in the setup—or could prove it, if he did. All that's left are Bogart's IOU's; and those gambling debts will mean nothing, without Bogart and his gunman to enforce them."

Matt Harbin considered for a moment, while the night wind washed through the cottonwood branches over head. "Then we let the boy have his chance?" he finally said. "We keep our mouths shut, as long as he behaves himself and tries to make himself worthy of bein' Walt Shapley's heir to the Diamond Wheel?"

"I'm hoping Tremont will have the courage to make a clean breast of it, himself—tell his step-father everything. I sort of think that, someday, he will. He's got a long road to travel, yet, on the way to becoming an honest-to-God man! But, of course, it's up to you to say. You're the one who'll have to stand the brunt of the thing."

HIS FRIEND shot him a quick look, seeing nothing but the dim oval of the other's face in the dark beneath the tree. "You're pulling out, then? You're leaving Diamond Wheel?"

"I figure so. After a little visit to our friend Pender, in Crystal Springs. Why not? My job is finished."

"I dunno, Jim." Matt Harbin shook his head. "A gent has to light, sometime. I found that out—almost too late; I wish I'd learned it years ago. But you, Jim—hell, you're a hero in this valley, now! Stay, and you can write your own ticket with any outfit you care to sign with—or, Shapley would likely back you in staking an outfit of your own. Why keep rolling?"

But Reasoner said only, "That's kind of a big question, Matt. I'd have to give some thought to it." But his voice was slow and serious, Harbin noticed.

"Well, you better start thinkin'!"

The talk was finished. Matt Harbin turned away abruptly, saying, "I got too much to do, to be standing here gabbing. G'night, Jim."

"Good night."

His friend's going left Reasoner strangely sobered. He lowered himself onto the bench beneath the tree, fumbled out papers and tobacco and slowly built a cigarette. He got
(Please Turn To Pg. 130)

Those That Fight

WITH US OR AGAINST?" THE HELLION HORDE DEMANDED, AND EVERY TOWNSMAN HAD TO HAVE HIS ANSWER BY SUNDOWN! POWERFUL RANGE NOVELET!

by JOHN
LUMSDEN



CHAPTER I COLD BLOOD

THEY STARTED lining them up at sunset. An awful quiet was along the street, and there

was a cold, blank-staring quality about the way the last light of the sun reflected off the windowpanes and the flat surfaces of the false-front buildings.

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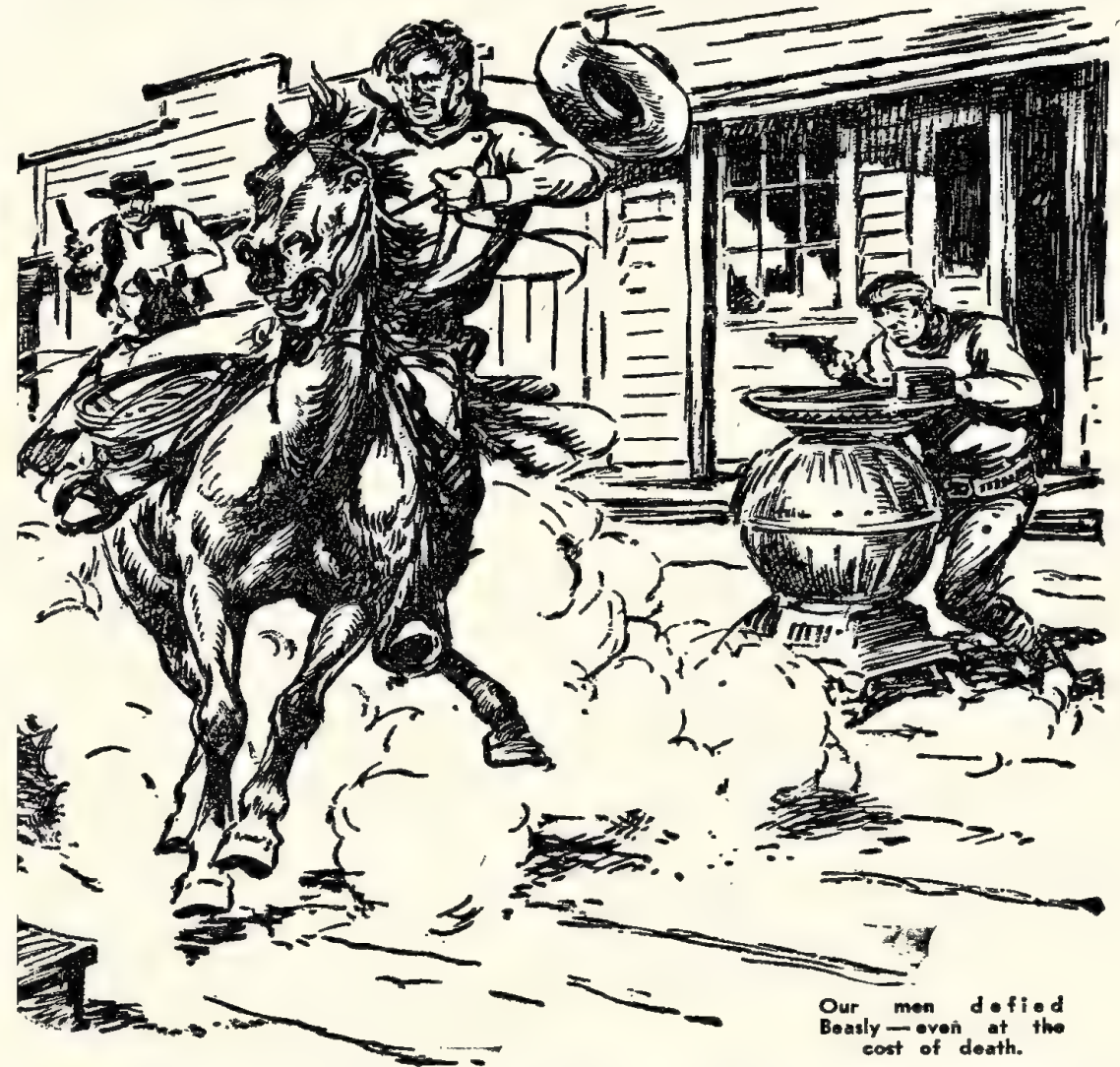
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Increase H. Avery, John knew, held no such doubts. Increase was a man of honor, an honest man—a man. John did not know what the devil he himself was.

Increase knew what was right and what was wrong, and he knew that you didn't compromise with wrong,

nor speculate about which was the best way to combat it. Increase knew that you stood up for right with every ounce of strength in your body, and that you surrendered your life before you surrendered an inch to wrong.

One of the Beasley henchmen gave Increase a shove as they herded them along the street, and Increase



Our men defied Beasley—even at the cost of death.

Dead, it was certain he'd never rescue Dillon range from this land-grabber scourge. By staying alive he could at least always be a potential force for law and justice. So it wasn't that he just wanted to save his own hide, John Mallard kept telling himself, when it came to showdown...

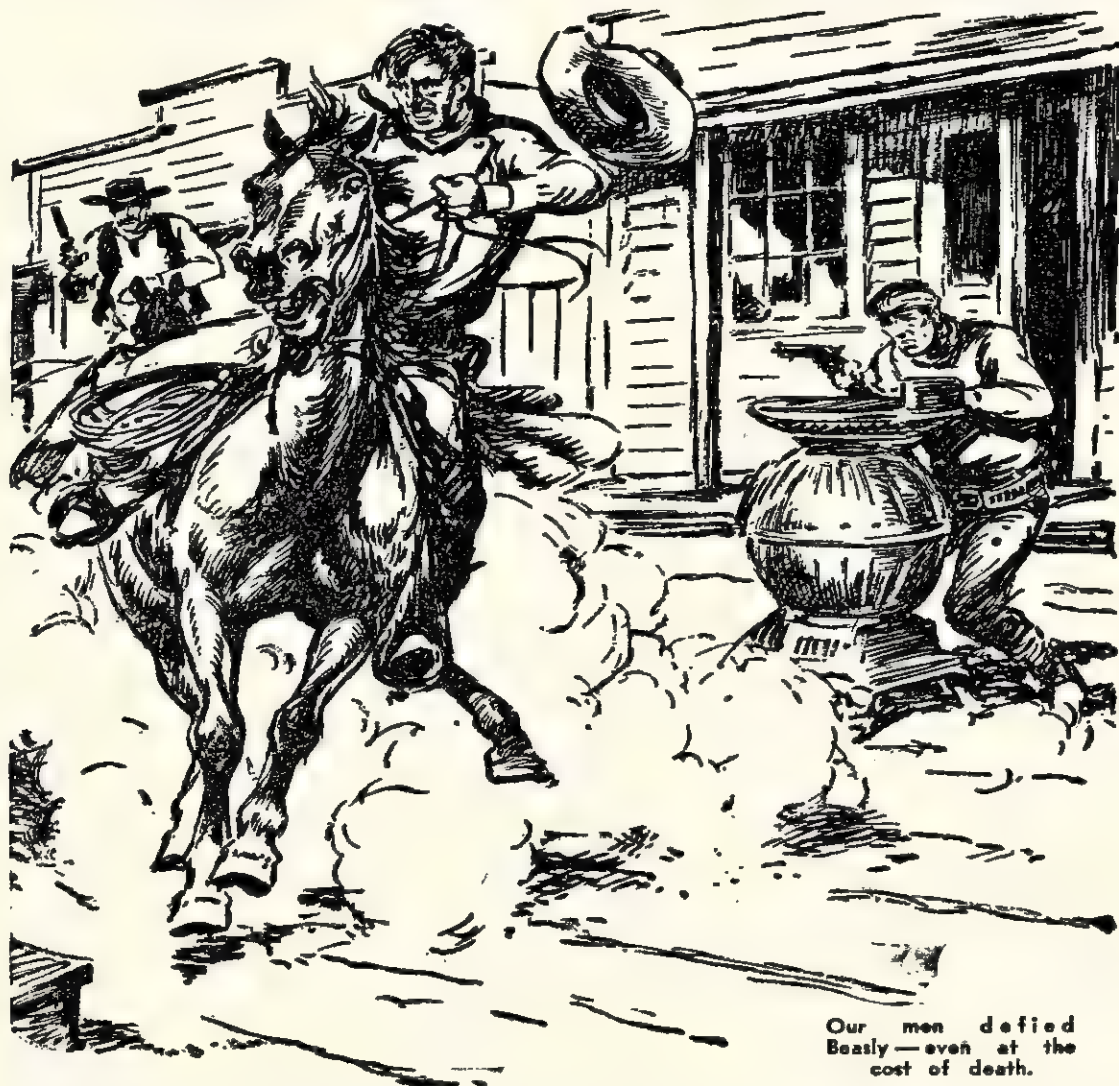
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turned around and booted the fellow in the groin. Two other Beasley henchmen immediately worked Increase over from behind with gun-butts. One of the savage blows clipped Increase's skull, and that put him on one knee in the dust; the other blows took him promiscuously.

John Mallard licked his lips. Sometimes he seemed to hear his heart pounding loudly, and then it would get very quiet, as though it were barely functioning.

It was a soft, summer evening. It was the kind of evening when you could sit on your porch and hear all the small sounds, the voices of playing children in the distance, or an old cow's petulant moo, or dogs barking.

Tonight the small sounds had the clarity but not the innocence. Tonight you heard the too-many booted feet on the boardwalks, and the occasional cursing. Or such things as those sudden violent thuds of the Beasley guns on Increase's body.

John Mallard glanced at the eyes of the men along the row that began where the sheriff's office jutted out from the line of the falsefronts, as he took his place. None of their eyes met his. Each of them, John knew, was struggling inwardly with his own problem. Each of them knew that he had to decide within the next five to ten minutes whether or not he wanted to die.

"Are you with us or against us?"

Bard Beasley was saying it. In so many words now. No longer in looks and double-talk and innuendo. No longer behind the scenes.

Beasley had simply been in Dillon one day; that was all anybody seemed to remember. Some eight months ago. Standing around on the street smoking the stogey he always had in his mouth and looking at people and frequently smiling too broadly at them.

Then the gunsters had begun to be in town. And the sheriff had chased them at first. Later the sheriff gave that up. And he avoided people's eyes on the street. And he ducked townsmen who faced him squarely with it. He threw a couple persistent ones in jail who said out-

right that he was in Beasley's pay. And the court backed him.

THEN THINGS had begun happening to a couple of the people who wouldn't accept Beasley's contemptible offers for their businesses or ranches.

It had gone like that, steadily, until the open meetings were called by the more intrepid citizens. Demanding what was to be done about Beasley's creeping rule. Adopting a resolution to have a new election of local officers.

Then what John Mallard had all along felt in his bones would finally happen, happened. Bard Beasley put his cards on the table. He took his gun army and took over the town by force. He took his gun army and rounded up every man on Dillon range, to hear each state his position in front of his neighbors.

And he was personally shooting in the belly all those who said they were against him. He had started at the far end of the line while his men were still shoving this end into place. John Mallard had heard Beasley's gun crack once almost immediately, but that had been all. And he was moving steadily along the line.

So most of the men were saving their hides—

John Mallard was tall, six-feet-two unshod. He stood a little stoop-shouldered, as though from ducking to go through doorways. He kept his gaze fastened on the thick dust in the middle of the street. *Saving his hide wasn't the question, for god's sake.* The question was what use were you to anybody dead—wasn't it, above every other consideration, better to stay alive? Dead, it was certain that you would never again fight against evil; alive, you were at least always a potential force for good.

Beasley's gun cracked again. A townsman made a fierce lunge from the line at Beasley and one of the Beasley henchmen deployed along the street dropped the fellow with his .30-30, which he immediately levered again.

John Mallard felt his brain whirl. He tried very hard to get hold of

himself, because he knew this craziness sweeping him was exactly the condition Beasley had contrived to nurture.

"With us or against us?"

No answer. From the sixth man down from John Mallard.

"With us or against us?"

John could barely hear the "with".

John flicked a look at Increase. They'd thrown a pail of water in Increase's face and shoved him into line again. His iron-grey hair was wet-flat on his head and dripping. He shook his head once, put a hand to it.

"With us or against us?" Beasley said to Increase, and that was when the stark reality of this nightmare caught John Mallard in the pit of his stomach. The men approached up to now were men he knew around; Increase was his friend. And Increase would be dead in another moment if he gave the wrong answer. Which John knew he would.

"He's groggy now," John suddenly said. "What he says now won't be what he means."

Beasley looked at John. Beasley was chewing a thin cigar back and forth across his teeth. He was a middle-aged, middle-sized man with what would generally have been adjudged a reasonable face. He dressed in ordinary range garb. Only his eyes gave him away. They never rested. They were eternally fermenting, behind the pattern of the eternal stogy.

Beasley looked back to Increase. Even the way Beasley held the .45 in his hand gave no hint of the villainy of the man. He held it without tension or threat or grace. The dull glint of it in the twilight caught John's glance with the fascination of a snake, for his mind could somehow not take in that this ordinary weapon in this short-fingered hand could, would murder, had just murdered in cold blood.

"With or against?"

Increase slowly raised his head, slowly raised one shaggy eyebrow at Beasley. Slowly hiked one corner of his mouth in a sneering, contemptuous smile.

Then like the lick of a whip, Increase spat full in Beasley's face, too fast for Beasley to duck.

Beasley triggered the gun. He had been using one bullet. He used three on Increase. He took a blue bandanna out of a hip pocket and wiped his face.

"With or against?" he said to the next one.

"Against!" the man, a father of three children, ground out deliberately through his teeth.

A henchman handed Beasley another gun when his clicked empty. The father of three children narrowed his eyes as his sun-baked lips suddenly trembled. Beasley shot him in the belly.

"Are you with us or against us?"

"Against, you stinking—!"

The gun's blast cut this off.

"How about you?" John Mallard knew Beasley was finally addressing him.

This was not a time for emotion. This was the time of all times to keep your head—

"With," John Mallard said, and his voice was hoarse and he didn't know what to do with his eyes. He fastened his eyes hard on Beasley's eyes, but Beasley was already addressing the next in line.

CHAPTER II

HIDDEN VALLEY

THE RIDERS and the wagons wandering out of Dillon that night bore in their every motion and pattern the brand of the thing that had happened. They seemed to stagger along aimlessly, arriving at their destinations as though by chance. The stunned bafflement hung over the country like the smoke and dust after a dynamite explosion. The three-quarters-full moon offered no comfort, sat in a gentle summer sky and watched feelinglessly, deepened the furrows in men's faces, endorsed the pallor of the women, gave to their homes and buildings an eerie, impermanent cast.

John Mallard went along the

bench that edged his place, eased his bay down off it in the treacherous talus. He took the saddle off the animal in the long shed. Out in the yard he started to make another cigarette but then didn't, knowing that another cigarette was not what he wanted. He put the Durham back in his breast pocket and then he let his eyes lift to Increase's house, just visible beyond the rise.

He went in and took off his boots in the moonlit back room and stretched out fully dressed on his cot and stared out of pinpoint eyes at the ceiling. Pinpoint to shut out everything. To shut out even thinking, where sleep could never come to do this.

What in the hell, his brain kept saying. What in the hell...

So what in the hell would it be now. John Mallard stood in the doorway of his house, the glittering early-morning sun of a very hot day full in his face. All business, John thought, would be transacted now through Beasley. You'd have to sell your cattle through him, at his price, you'd have to buy in his stores. You'd live on his terms.

Or you could sell out to him for a song and move on to another range. Unless he had you shot in the back when you rode out so you wouldn't carry stories that might discourage travellers, prospective homesteaders.

John Mallard shook his head, to get free of the grogginess and weakness of a sleepless night. His eye flicked toward Increase's place. *So what the devil was the difference.* He hadn't stayed alive to concern himself with such matters. He'd stayed alive to fight. To dedicate himself to smashing Beasley.

And the sooner I get started, the better.

HHE HUNG a feed bag on his horse, to ready the animal quickly. He tossed off four scalding cups of strong black coffee. He rode to the house of his next neighbor beyond Increase's. This was Ed Sanborn. Sanborn was a medium-sized, middle-aged man with amiable, frightened eyes. His wife was dead,

his two daughters had married young cattlemen and gone farther west with them.

"What are we going to do, Ed," John said.

"That's it," Ed said, chewing his lower lip.

"We've got to fight Beasley. We can't let him get away with this."

"I know we can't."

John sucked in a long breath.

"What I plan to do is talk to every man on this range. We've got to organize, or we'll never get anywhere against Beasley. Like some of us were trying to do before. Only this time we'll have to do it under cover, not in the open."

"Sure," Ed Sanborn agreed.

Like some of us were trying to do. John thought about that as he rode on down the trail. Like the ones with guts were trying to do, was what it had been—the ones who were mostly all dead now....

"So what'll we do first," Bart Wilson asked after John found the big, silver-grey-headed cowman out on range.

"That's the question," John said. "First we've got to get together and work out a plan."

"We'll have to be plenty slick to hold a meeting without Beasley getting wind of it!" Wilson said.

"No doubt of that," John said. "We'll just have to do it very smart and careful."

"What do you mean, we'll all meet out in the hills someplace?" Manny Farber wanted to know. He stood on his big, wide veranda and searched John Mallard's eyes in that squared-off, holding off way John had felt in most of the ranchers he approached.

"Can you think of something better?" John replied somewhat irritably. It was mid-afternoon and he had been going from spread to spread, shoving his horse in the swelling heat, digging out the cattlemen from wherever they were on their places.

Farber looked at John Mallard, unperturbed. *Here was one, John thought, who said "with" pure and simple to save his hide.* "What if

Beasley finds out about it?" Farber jabbed.

"All right, then he finds out. You're not for letting him get away with this thing, are you?"

"Hell no," Farber said. *But the pause was there first, the unmistakable pause.*

"All right, Friday night then. Midnight Friday. At the Malacosoma Notch, and then we head back into that hidden valley there."

CHAPTER III

JESSICA

DID BEASLEY get wind of it? Had he already recruited spies from among the ranchers? John Mallard moved along the boardwalk wondering. Because he'd just passed Beasley, who roamed the town freely, and Beasley had kept his eyes on Mallard's face too blamed long. And with a devilish little smile behind the look.

Or was this another of Beasley's crafty methods of routing his enemies? The man seemed to have no fear, seemed to be completely confident of his ability to outwit and break any opponent, and he went about seemingly without gun-guards, without caution. Even this manner could have been part of his scheme, to instill in those who might think of opposing him that so doing was utterly hopeless (and John was pretty sure Beasley gun-guards or their hot lead would appear quickly enough if anybody made a move against Beasley).

And now this long, knowing look—maybe he put that on everybody, in order that they'd gain the impression he was not only all-powerful but all-knowing too.

John Mallard smiled sourly at the turn of his thoughts. *Well he's got a good subject in me, hasn't he. I go on nursing ideas like that and I'll break myself before Beasley gets to it.*

It was three days since the hell, since John began working on his neighbors for a meeting, and he'd now put two others on the task to

make it harder for Beasley to figure what was going on; if, for example, Beasley learned how much of the time Mallard was away from his place, explanation of where John had been would be difficult.

He went into the mercantile and bought supplies.

And when he came out Beasley was across the street watching him. Still wearing the little smile.

John felt his gut tighten. He paused involuntarily and returned Beasley's look.

And Beasley broadened the smile into a very pleasant one....

John's gut dumped again when, a half hour later, he opened the front screen door of his house. Senselessly, but it did it. Because there was no reason to feel anything at finding Jessica Smith waiting for him. *Beasley's getting to you good—*

"Hello," he said.

Jessica Smith was the girl John Mallard had wanted to marry—back in the dim long ago before Beasley, before Beasley had become all a man could think about. She was a very pretty girl, but a girl with a very strong character too. With such a strong character that John had sometimes seriously wondered if he was good enough for her.

He hadn't seen her since the hell. He hadn't, in fact, even let himself think about her. In the back of his mind was the strong feeling that before he could think again about Jessica, he must first set himself right on the Beasley thing. To think about Jessica was to think about what her estimation would be of a man who had done what he'd done in the Beasley showdown. Jessica Smith was made of much the same stuff as Increase Avery—

Jessica didn't return his greeting. She simply searched John's eyes. As though she might have been looking for something. *As though she might have reserved judgment on him and was looking for evidence to tip her decision one way or the other.*

"Father told me that you were calling all the men to a meeting. To fight Beasley."

"Yes."

"Father seems very excited about this. As if it can succeed against Beasley."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"He felt as you evidently did. He has kept saying that he said 'with' because dead he could do nothing, alive he could fight. Was that how you felt, John?"

"That might have been it, yes."

Jessica had wide blue eyes. She had short-cropped blonde hair and bangs that were awry on her square forehead. And faded tan jeans and a crisp white blouse open carelessly low. *Not to draw the eyes of men*, John thought, *but out of unconcern, out of it being quicker to fasten two buttons than four—*

John said abruptly, "This isn't the time to mention that it occurs to me it's been a very long while since I've kissed you, is it?"

Jessica's look was what John expected. Disbelief. Deep disbelief.

She said, "No it is not, John."

He could see her decision tipping. Against him. He did not think, he suddenly realized, that he liked being checked up on—

"I think it is the time to mention it," he said.

Pain was with the disbelief in her eyes then.

"You're disappointed in me, aren't you," he said. "You were disappointed that I saved my hide and you were hoping that I was justifying it with this meeting business. You were hoping I'd convince you that this was the right way, weren't you."

Jessica had not moved from the middle of the big room where she'd been when John opened the screen door. He had not moved either. He'd only let the door go shut behind him.

Jessica suddenly started to go past him, but he put out his hand and caught her arm in a hard grip. She didn't try to break away. She simply looked at him. *With the dead, martyr look he knew would be there.*

He kissed her on the mouth and she did not try to avert her face. And she did not try to draw back from the kiss. Her lips were soft not with tenderness but with every-

thing gone from them, like her eyes....

DO IT violent, some of the ranchers and townsmen said; pick off Beasley's hardcases "mysteriously" from ambush, to demoralize his crew, to make it hard for him to hire new gunsters.... Do it peaceful, others demanded: raise few cattle, buy minimum supplies, "slow" the range down so that there'd be little money flowing through Beasley's hands, so that new people would be discouraged from coming to the section.... Do both, was the final vote. Do everything possible to buck Beasley, without ever giving him anything specific to crack down on, without ever openly opposing him.

The men left the Friday midnight meeting enthusiastically. The trouble was, Beasley apparently had a plan too. A satanic kind of plan, like only Beasley would have conceived....

Two days later Bard Montross went to town to talk to an Army man about a beef shipment. Montross, of all the cattlemen, had been the least vocal at the fight-Beasley meeting. Which was what made what happened particularly baffling.

Beasley came out of the hotel lobby as Montross started to mount the steps to the high veranda. Beasley waited at the top of the steps, lowering his eyes to the big rancher without tilting his face down. As Montross' head came level with the veranda, Beasley booted him full in the face.

One of Beasley's own hardbitten hirelings, in a chair on the veranda dumped back against the wall, was moved to mutter, "Jeest!" The jaw of the desk clerk fell a foot. Passers-by stopped along the boardwalk as though paralyzed.

Montross had crashed onto the boardwalk like a poleaxed steer. He'd put out a hand toward the rickety railing and had touched it only enough to change slightly the pattern of his fall.

Beasley had taken one of his stogies from a breast pocket and put

it in his mouth and snicked a match into flame with a thumbnail and lit the cigar. And surveyed the street, in deliberate detail, as though he had done the stunning thing simply to study its effect on the town.

Montross was dead with a broken neck. Beasley met the Army man, arranged for the cattle delivery. Montross' wife and two boys went to live with her brother, who had a place on the other side of the long hills. Two more small ranchers put their spreads up for sale and Beasley made the only offers.

CHAPTER IV

ONE FOR INCREASE

JOHAN MALLARD heard about it for the first time a week later when he saw the cancelled sale notices on the town bulletin board and asked at the livery what they were all about; John had dug in at his place to catch up on work, and had not been to town since the meeting.

He rode back trying to figure it out. *To get Montross' outfit? Could the objective have been as simple as that?* Beasley was a master of the brutal, bold stoke, but such a blunt steal at this time and on such a small scale was a pointless move for him.

More likely it was intended to keep a fresh blade of fear turning in local stomachs. More likely Beasley had struck at random, to heighten the mysteriousness of his ways, to stun and confuse the range anew, and so keep it firmly under heel.

Whatever Beasley's idea had been, it worked to his advantage. The two cattlemen who sold out were ones Mallard had figured would be decent fighters in the resistance, but now they had chosen to allocate their courage to chancing bullets in the back as they rode out, instead of to the fight against Beasley. And John Mallard could feel in the very air the freeze the vicious incident had put on the range. It was like having a half-healed wound jabbed open just when you'd begun to see

the possibility of your recovering from it.

Most of the ranchers, at a second secret meeting after a month, cited passive resistance as their contribution—they'd bought practically nothing in the stores, they'd held off on building up their herds, they'd sold as little beef as possible through the "pool" Beasley had set up to "facilitate" shipment and sale to the cities of local cattle.

Three of the men claimed long-range tries from ambush with .30-30's at Beasley henchmen. None was sure he'd scored. John himself had done no better. He'd taken a position above the town trail for several hours the past six days in a row, in the hope of greeting the new recruits for Beasley's army that John had learned Beasley had sent his top sidearm to import. But these hadn't shown yet.

"I'll stick there, by god, until they do show," John growled.

The men fidgeted. John threw away a half-smoked cigarette, threw it pointlessly hard, as though this might fill the silence that strangled the meeting after the mock-enthusiastic reports.

"That'll keep him trimmed down anyway," Ed Sanborn commented agreeably.

John went back to his place that night with his insides crawling. This whole damned thing wasn't worth a damn and every man of them knew it. So they'd stayed alive to fight, eh. Dead they could do nothing, alive they were at least always a potential force for good, eh.

The devil they were.

You fought evil or you didn't fight evil. There weren't any in-between zones. If you didn't fight evil, you were evil yourself or a lowdown, stinking coward.

John had lit another cigarette, coming from the corral where he'd simply dumped his saddle off his horse onto the ground, and he slammed it away unsmoked.

There was a way to fight Beasley—you went and fought him. You called him to his face, and all right so his crew tore you to ribbons, you took Beasley with you first by god.

John lit another cigarette standing there straddle-legged in the yard, staring narrow-eyed in the direction of the town, the pale three-quarters moon laying silver dust on solid blocks of shadow all around him, giving him an eerie, statue-like look. John took a long, deep pull on this cigarette.

He went in the house and lit the lamp on the kitchen table and a great, deeply satisfactory calm was on him, and he filled two gunbelts and he checked his gun, tried it in and out of holster a few times, and he slung the gunbelts over one shoulder.

H E GOT HIS horse, and the ash was long on his cigarette in his wide, flat, calm mouth, and the ash broke off clean as he swung into the saddle. It was too early to go into town looking for Beasley, but he was going now anyway. Sometimes Beasley was supposed to sleep two miles out of town at one of the places he'd "bought." Sometimes, they said, he slept out in the hills at a pitched camp. Sometimes he used his room on the top floor of the hotel. Wherever he stayed, a day rarely passed that he did not appear on the main street.

John Mallard rode slowly, steadily, toward town. He kept his eyes narrowed straight ahead as though against thought, against any distraction that might stay his decision. He stepped down on a knoll above the town, and ground-tied his horse in a clump of buckbrush that had plenty of juicy bunchgrass at its feet.

John Mallard crouched there in the cover of the brush and he kept his gaze on the town and he chain-smoked the night away.

Maybe he let himself have one thought. About Jessica. This would tip the scales back again in his favor, he let himself think, and it was a warming thought. Why shouldn't she have passed judgment on him? Why shouldn't any decent person pass judgment on one who would crawl before a monster like Beasley?

Increase would like this too. John let himself think about that too.

John must have dozed, because all of a sudden he found the pale edge of dawn advancing around him. He stashed one of the two gunbelts between two small boulders; on second thought, placed it so that the center of it was arched up handle-fashion, so that it could be easily grabbed up from saddle. If he came out of this alive, he might leave town with some of Beasley's crew on his tail, and a fresh round of cartridges could come in handy about here. He took off his regular belt and strapped the other bullet-carrying one around his middle after transferring his holster and gun to it.

He rode into town before it was scarcely astir. He put his animal at the restaurant rack, and he literally helped Billy Boyle open up.

"What in the devil are you doing in town at this hour," Billy muttered out of the corner of his mouth, which was more characteristic than secretive. Billy was in on the resistance, in an uncomfortable way; he moved with assurance at tasks connected with his business, but he was not happy with trouble.

"I figured I'd come in early today," John said.

Billy finished propping up the wooden awning. He dropped one loose, watery eye once to Mallard's bullet-studded belt.

"What's all the ammunition for?"

John didn't answer. He simply gave Billy a flat, wall-eyed look when Billy searched his face briefly getting no answer.

"What do you want, the works?" Billy said quietly leading the way into the restaurant. The screen door screeched back and forth on its rusty batwing-like hinges.

"Coffee's enough," John said.

Setting the steaming cup in front of him, Billy Boyle looked Mallard over with more interest.

"I always pictured you as a man who liked his victuals," Billy said slowly.

"It's too hot to eat," John said.

John Mallard was down sipping the last of his coffee when he saw Beasley. Billy Boyle turned from the big shiny urn with a half cup

for himself at the same moment and he froze in his tracks and the cup clicked dully twice against the saucer.

Beasley was wearing the too wide smile. He was on the boardwalk looking in the big window at John Mallard. The sun was up enough to be making opaque planes of the windows it touched aslant, and it lay across the wide restaurant glass in a streaky way that gave Beasley's face a dream-like look, as though you might have been imagining it.

John was keeping his mind thoughtless in this thing, to prevent any possibility of reason corroding his resolve, and he let intuition guide him now. From the start of his decision, he had known he'd have to act before he thought throughout, and he did that now.

He didn't weigh how come Beasley was on the street so early in the morning. He didn't speculate on what Beasley's smiling that hellish smile in at him like that, might have signified. He didn't even permit himself to wonder if maybe his brain was playing him tricks, from no sleep perhaps, or from too much brooding about the Beasley thing, or from plain nightmare fear. John acted first.

He drew his gun and triggered it point-blank at Beasley's image. Then his brain exploded. That was the last he knew, what felt like his brain exploding, with Beasley's widely grinning face going with it, like what happens to a reflection in a pool when a stone is tossed into it....

CHAPTER V

REBELLION

IT CAME back that way too. Much of the same outlines that he'd last seen, but in a misty, bright haze now.

The big window was gone, only the shards of it centered now on the point where he'd aimed his gun. So he'd got his shot off all right at least.

But had it hit Beasley? And what was this with him, with himself?

John Mallard found that he was in a twisted squat on the floor between two of the counter stools. As though he had gone first to his knees, and then had squatted back from there.

He became aware of the pull of the stiff, sodden thing at his temple, and he put his hand to it, and he knew it was partially dried blood.

His eyes filled in more of the story then—turning, he saw Billy Boyle sprawled face down at the end of the counter, motionless, with the appearance of a man who had stepped on something slippery and crashed to the floor grabbing frantically at anything in reach. The splotch of blood that had begun to spread even in the fabric of Billy's shirt, belied the look of the man's demise though. Billy had evidently got caught scrambling for the back door.

But had John Mallard's bullet taken Beasley? John pushed to his feet to find out about that. He felt relief that he could follow the intention with the act.

He gazed out into the sun-blasted street, and seeing the men shooting, shoving, shouting, and as his ears began to make contact with his brain for the first time, he realized that the town was in an uproar. Guns were crackling, close to, far off. Men, none of whom he could identify surely, lay motionless in the dust up and down the street. The one thing John could be certain of was that Beasley did not lie dead on the boardwalk where he must have been standing when John shot at him. Nor was there any sign of blood there on the boards.

So what was this? Had John's shot touched off all-out open rebellion of the townsmen?

Or had it brought a new scourge by Beasley?

Suddenly John recognized a Beasley hired-gun, prodding another man ahead of him, with the snout of a .30-30. And almost at the same moment he recognized the man as one of the ranchers, Manny Farber. So whatever had happened, it was not going good for the resistance.

And then John saw Jessica, coming into the street at the top end

of the town on her dancing piebald, triggering a small gun in her right hand. And he saw the rope crawl out from the hand of the son standing spraddled-legged on the veranda-roof of the emporium, and wiggle neatly over Jessica's shoulders.

John's right hand went to holster for a gun that was not there. He ripped open the screen door and plunged into the street. He saw Jessica dragged from the saddle by the lasso, as her horse leapt away panicked. He saw an unshaven sidewinder come out of the mercantile and grap the rope that had snared Jessica, while the one who'd tossed it dropped down from the porch roof. He saw, suddenly, still another gunman striding toward him with .45 in big fist and lips in thin like wire.

John cocked his right fist but it lifted like lead and it didn't work, like trying to hit an antagonist in a nightmare, and then the fellow slapped the muzzle of the .45 across John's face, slapped it against his temple...

Jessica's voice came to John when he revived this time, but it bore firmness and calm, so he doubted what his senses told him. After that, though, he was sure he recognized Bart Wilson's voice—and then Ed Sanborn's—

"You're going to have to stay lying flat," Jessica said to John when he started to shove up onto an elbow.

HE WAS in the big front room of Jessica's house. Cots and beds and mattresses were arrayed in two rows across the room hospital-fashion, and John was on the last cot at the kitchen door end. Jessica stood framed in the doorway, and she looked as pretty as ever, but the strong character was more in her face now than the femininity. The responsibility for all these wounded men was mainly there now.

"But what—" John began.

Jessica recited it, in a strangely toneless voice. She didn't know where John had gone out on the sequence of events, but after Beasley had started rounding up every-

body again, like the original time, and some of the women had fled with their children down the south trail to Carter City and Reservation, the army from down that way decided that the time for them to strike was at hand and there wasn't a minute to lose—

"Army?" John said. "What—"

"Yes, it was an army," Jessica went on. "Must have numbered a hundred strong, and armed to the teeth, and when they hit town they swept Beasley and his crew before them like chaff before a hurricane

"Practically every able-bodied man from all around, it was, from as far south as Long Creek. They'd been organizing for this strike to free us from Beasley, they said, ever since the stories first started drifting out to them of the valiant way our men defied Beasley even at cost of death—"

A bewhiskered man in one of the nearby beds put in hoarsely, "The one that spit in Beasley's eye, that was the one must have roused us up most, I reckon!"

Increase, John Mallard thought. *He'd saved the range—though he was dead. He'd smashed evil, without power, without arms, by never giving evil an inch—*

"But what caused Beasley—I mean, do you know why he'd decided to crack down on everybody again?" John husked.

Jessica shrugged impatiently.

"He'd just decided to crack down again, that's all. What difference would it make why he did this time—beyond his usual reason of plain brutality and greed?"

So she didn't know, nobody knew, that he'd stood up to Beasley face to face this morning, had smashed lead at Beasley with full knowledge that in so doing he was almost surely forfeiting his own life. Billy Boyle, who could have told about it, was dead... Beasley—Beasley knew about it of course—

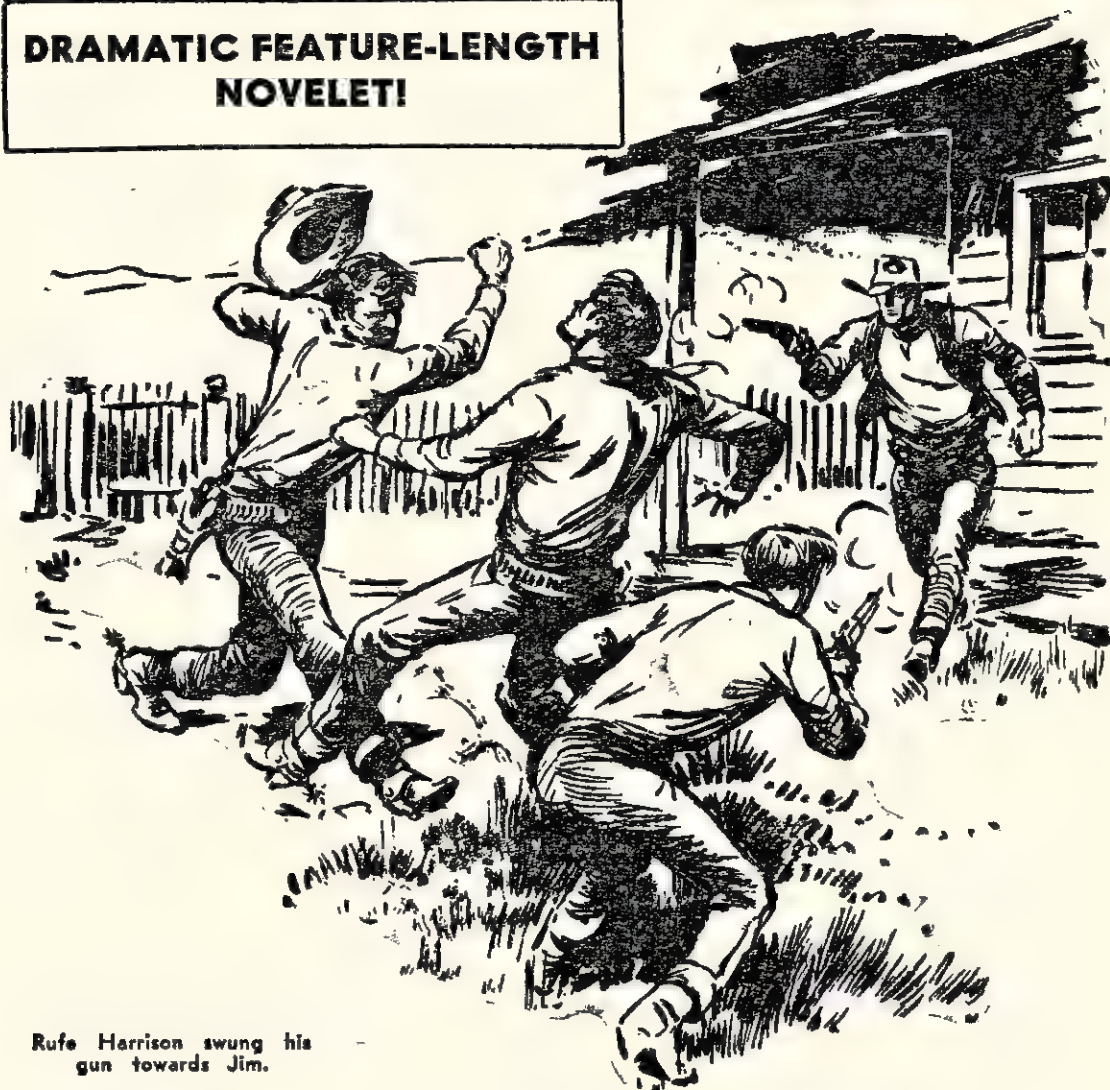
"Is Beasley dead?" John suddenly said.

Jessica smiled grimly. Loud guffaws came from around the room, for John realized he'd almost shouted the question. "Dead is

(Please Turn To Page 129)

**WAS A LAWMAN'S FIRST ALLEGIANCE TO
HIS BADGE—OR TO
HIS OWN CODE?**

**DRAMATIC FEATURE-LENGTH
NOVELET!**



Rufe Harrison swung his
gun towards Jim.

THE

by **WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER**

DEVIL AND OLD MAN GILLIS

**He was the sheriff. . . and the sheriff had to heed a call
for help . . . whether it came from a big rancher, or a
trail bum—or a dark-haired cowgirl he was once in
love with. . .**

CHAPTER I

THE HELLER

THE TENMILE folks allowed that the universe was a triangle, the three corners being the good Lord, the devil, and old man Gillis, but young Sheriff Jim Waldron had a different notion. He figured the universe was a straight line with the Lord on one end of the rope, Gillis on the other, and the devil in the middle. For downright cussedness, Jim contended, the old man threw a shadow plumb across purgatory.

Fred Gillis, the old man's boy, was in town with the Circle G crew loading a bunch of steers. He stopped at the sheriff's office, and said sort of off-handedly that his dad wanted to see Jim. About that time Jim let out a blast of sulphur and brimstone that would have done the old man proud, but Fred just grinned and walked off. Fred was all right except for the fact that Gillis was his pa, and you couldn't blame Fred for that.

Jim went across the street to the post office, telling himself he'd just forget Gillis' request, which, in plain Tenmile English, was an order. He unlocked his post office box, took out his mail, and got a second jolt. There was a letter from Martha Bilbo. No, Martha Gillis it was, or should be.

Jim walked back to his office, staring at Martha's fine Spencerian handwriting. Coming from the river bottom as she had, Martha never had a chance for much education, but she could write a mighty pretty hand. Just like in the copybook Jim had when he was in school. Then he noticed the postmark. *Tenmile!* And the letter had been mailed the night before.

It took a little doing for Jim to hang onto his sanity. When Martha had left the country four years before, she'd sworn she would never come back. The way Jim got it, she'd told off old man Gillis in a manner to which he was not accustomed. But

she was back, or she'd had someone mail the letter for her.

Jim went through the rest of his mail. Reward dodgers. A couple of bills. A letter from a ten-cow rancher on the other side of the range asking him to look into some rustling. That was all except Martha's letter.

He stared at it a full minute before he worked up enough courage to open it. There had been a time when he'd been in love with Martha himself, but that had been five years ago when they were both kids. Before, he'd known what was happening, she'd up and married Fred Gillis.

Now, staring at his name on the envelope, Jim thought about the bundle of letters he had in his trunk, written with the passion of a sixteen-year-old girl who thinks she is in love. Well, she hadn't been. Not with Jim Waldron anyway, or she wouldn't have run off to Durango and married Fred Gillis. He thought of the letters he himself had written, the ring he had bought and never given her, the kisses under the cottonwoods beside the Dolores. This wasn't good. She had no right to come back into his life.

Jim ripped the envelope open, took out the single sheet of paper and flattened it on the desk.

Dear Jim,

I have no right to ask you for a favor after what has happened, but I have never forgotten that you liked me once. Besides, you are the sheriff. I must see you. I'm at the old Penrose cabin. Don't tell anybody.

Martha

You liked me once. He crumpled up the paper and threw it across the room. Hell's bells, "like" wasn't the word. She knew that. He had *loved* her. He still did, even after she'd married Fred Gillis, given him a son, and then run off. Now she had the gall to say "*You liked me once.*"

H E ROSE, and picking up the wad of paper, stuffed it into his pocket. Well, he'd see her. That ten-cow rancher on the other side of the range could wait. Everything used to wait for Martha. It still would. And old man Gillis could wait too.

Jim was buckling on his gun belt when someone came in. Turning, he saw it was Betty Miller, pretty and cool in her ruffly pink dress and smiling in that comfortable way she had. She had been waiting a year for him to ask her, but she might as well forget it. Martha was a fire in his veins, a fire that five years had not put out.

He said, "Howdy, Betty."

"Good morning, Jim." Her blue eyes ran down his long-boned frame, the smile lingering. "Going somewhere?"

"Taking a ride," he said.

It came to him, then, that he hadn't been fair with Betty. He'd taken her to dances and eaten the fudge she'd made for him on winter Sunday afternoons and drunk the lemonade she'd made in summer. It was natural enough for her to think he was courting her.

The devil with it. He'd just been lonely and she helped pass the time. It was her bad luck if she had counted on him. He never said a word about loving her. Never kissed her. Well, he would cut it off right now, and she would forget him. There were plenty of single men around Tenmile; she had her pick of the lot.

"Will you be back tonight?" she asked.

"Ain't sure."

"I was going to ask you for supper." The smile ran across her full lips again. "My fryers are big enough to eat. And I'll bake a chocolate cake."

That was like a woman, he thought sourly. Trap a man by the stomach. He'd had supper at her place more than once and every time he came close to foundering on her chicken and chocolate cake, but that was past. He said, "I may be gone a couple of days."

"Well, I'll go ahead and fix sup-

per. If you do get back, it will be ready."

"Don't count on me," he said, still brusque, and walked past her out of his office.

He saddled his roan and took the upriver road. The Penrose cabin was in some rough country on High Mesa. He wondered what Martha was doing there and why she hadn't come into town to stay. Why hadn't she come to see him if she'd been in Tenmile to mail the letter? Did she think he didn't have anything to do but ride all over the country when she sent for him?

He grinned sourly. She knew he'd come. Maybe he had a chance with her now that Fred was out of her mind. Anyhow, he came anytime she wiggled a finger. That was the kind of hairpin he was.

Three miles above town he passed the lane that turned off to Circle G. Old man Gillis would be lying in bed just the way he had been for the last six months. Paralyzed from the hips down. Crazy, the old man had been. Thought he was still spry enough to bust the wild ones, but he'd found a big black gelding that had busted him. Jim hadn't seen him since the accident and he didn't want to. The old man hadn't changed and he never would.

Jim was fifty yards past the turn-off when he thought of something. There might be a connection between Martha's letter and the old man's order to see him. Gillis hated her even more than he hated other folks, and Martha had plenty of cause to hate him. When he heard that Fred and Martha were married, he'd turned the air blue all the way from the ranch to Tenmile.

Jim reined around and took the lane to the Circle G. Might be a good idea to see the old man before he went on to the Penrose cabin. If Gillis knew Martha was in the country, he'd want her arrested on some trumped-up charge or another. That would be like him, but this was the morning Jim would tell him where he could head. He'd always wanted to. Just let the old reprobate come up with one of his ornery schemes and he'd see how far off he got.

CHAPTER II

CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK

THE CIRCLE G buildings were scattered in a bunch of pines about half a mile from the river, low log buildings that were comfortable enough for men, but never a place for women, and the old man hadn't changed a thing for Martha. He'd been rough on her from the start. To make it worse, she'd got herself pregnant the first month, and the bigger and sicker she got, the meaner the old man was. It all wound up in a fine blaze two months after the baby came, and Martha pulled out. Fred stayed. Old habits were too strong, Jim guessed. The old man had beaten Fred down for twenty years, and when Martha left, he just didn't have the guts to go with her.

Jim racked his roan in front of the house and went up on the porch. Old Charley Manders, the cook, answered Jim's knock. He said, "Come in, Sheriff. Gill's waiting for you."

Jim crossed the big living room, taking a quick look around. It had been a long time since he'd been here, but there was no change. A couple of bear rugs on the plank floor, the old leather couch and the pine table, some chairs, guns on the wall, saddles and bridles tossed in the corners. It was a good bet, Jim thought, that Martha hadn't been able to change a thing in the year she'd been here.

The old man's bedroom was at one end of the living room, and when he heard Jim's spurs, he bawled, "Where the devil you been, Waldron? Took you a year to get out here."

Jim went on into the bedroom. The old man was flat on his back, a blanket spread over him, legs as useless as two sticks. His face, Jim saw, was thinner than it had been before the accident, but the long sweeping mustache was the same, the sharp green eyes, the petulant scowl that creased his high forehead, and reached down to twist his lips under the mustache. The old man was as mean as ever, which was exactly

the way Jim had known he would be.

"Get down off your high horse," Jim said. "I had a notion not to stop at all."

"Oh, you did, did you?" Gillis bawled. "Well, let me tell you something, kid. You're coming up for election next year." He wagged a bony finger at Jim. "I may be laid up, but I can still pin the sheriff's star on the man I pick. I got you elected and I can get you licked."

Jim was sore, right down to his bootheels. He was twenty-five and he didn't like to be called "kid". Besides, he didn't figure the old man had anything to do with his election. Then he thought of Martha and forgot about himself. If old man Gillis were anything but what he was, he'd have been happy just seeing Martha around.

"What do you want?" Jim asked.

THE OLD MAN put his hands down against the mattress and shifted his shoulders. "You're gonna do a job. I don't want no back talk about it. I heard you was sweet on that no-good filly before Fred married her..."

"What do you mean, 'no-good'?" Jim said, anger stirring in him again.

Gillis snorted. "All right. All right. Reckon you're still sweet on her. I wish to blazes she'd married you instead of Fred. She would have, too, if you'd had a pa who owned a spread the size of Circle G. Knew a good thing when she saw it, but it didn't do her no good. She didn't get a blamed nickel when she left."

"No, I guess she wouldn't," Jim said.

Gillis laughed. It wasn't a pretty sound. The old man's laughs never were. "Well, she pulled out and it was good riddance. Now Fred gets a letter from her the other day. She's working in Denver. Claims she can make a home for the boy."

"Well, she's his mother."

"'Mother'! Now if that ain't the dangedest word to pin on her. Even if she is, she don't get Freddy. Not by a jugful she don't. That's where

you come in. She may want to go to court, which same won't get her nowhere, but she'll kick up a stink. Cheaper just to stop her before she gets started."

No, Martha wouldn't get anywhere in a court in Tenmile. Not with old man Gillis owning the judge the way he did. He'd own the jury, too. At least you couldn't find twelve men within fifty miles of Tenmile who'd vote against the old man.

"What do you want the boy for?" Jim asked.

"Want him? Why, you blamed ignorant, chuckle-headed idiot, he's my grandson, ain't he? I aim to raise him like a Gillis, not like none of the river bottom trash that—that woman came from. If she shows up, you get rid of her. Make love to her if you want to. Pay her. Threaten her. Throw her into the jug. Just get her out of the country." Gillis scratched his thinning hair, and added reluctantly, "You do the job and there's a thousand dollars in it for you."

This was the time to tell Gillis where he could go, but Jim didn't. He was too mad to say anything, too mad to think straight. He wheeled and would have stalked out if the boy hadn't run in. He had grown a lot since Jim had seen him, a fine looking kid with Martha's dark eyes and black hair and sharp little nose. He didn't look like any Gillis Jim had ever seen.

"Look, Grampa." The boy held up a grasshopper. "I caught him."

Then Jim saw a miracle. The old man's face softened, the scowl fled, and his voice was very tender when he said, "Well now, if that ain't the dad-gummedest hopper I ever seen. I'll bet you had a tussle with him."

"Sure did," the boy said proudly. "I cut sign on him and trailed him clean across the pasture."

The old man dug under his pillow and brought out a battered sack of horehound. "Here, you take a piece of candy and go out and catch another hopper. I'll have Charley fix you up a fishing pole."

The boy stuck a grubby hand into the sack and popped a piece of hore-

hound into his mouth. "You bet, Grampa," and ran out of the room.

Gillis lay listening until the sound of the boy's steps had died. Then he cleared his throat and looked at Jim, scowling again. "Well, you heard what I said."

"I heard all right," Jim said. "Cute little tike."

"Sharp as a tack," Gillis said with great pride. "Chip off the old block. Rides a horse like he was born on one. She ain't getting her hands on that boy. Now you hit for town and keep your eyes peeled. If that... woman shows up—"

"Gillis," Jim said, "I don't give a hang about what you can do to me when election comes up. That's Martha's boy. She's got a right to him if she wants him."

"Why, you blasted—" Gillis began.

Jim walked out, leaving the old man sputtering. When he swung into the saddle, he saw the boy pursuing another grasshopper across the horse pasture.

CHAPTER III

MARTHA

IT WAS NEARLY noon when Jim reached the top of High Mesa and rode through the aspens. The first frost had turned the leaves orange. They fluttered above him in the chill wind, ceaselessly turning in the delicate way they had. Some had already fallen and lay tinder-dry in the trail so that his horse's hoofs made rustling sounds each time they dropped, the noise running out through the brittle stillness. Martha must have heard him, for she was waiting in front of the cabin.

Jim reached the clearing and reined up, the noon sun falling sharp and bright upon Martha. Her red lips held a wistful smile as she looked at Jim. For a moment neither spoke. He had seen her only once after she'd had the baby. Four years ago. She'd been seventeen then. Twenty-one now, four years younger than Jim and Fred Gillis.

The years had not taken anything from her. They had added some-

thing, he thought, perhaps maturity, a round perfection of breasts and hips that had been lacking when she was younger. In other ways she was the same, the sharp little nose, the dark eyes, the hair so black it held a blue gloss.

"Jim," she breathed.

He swung out of the saddle and she ran to him. There was no holding back. There never had been any holding back with her. Her arms came around his neck. She kissed him and clung to him; he felt the round softness of her breasts, the shocking violence of her kiss, and for this moment the bitterness that five years had brought to him was swept away. There were just the two of them here in a world surrounded by aspens. Nothing else mattered. Nothing at all.

She drew away, a hand coming up to caress his cheek. "I knew you'd come, Jim. I knew you would."

He looked at her, the certainty that had been in him for the one short moment suddenly gone. He didn't know why. It was just that one kiss could not bridge five years. She had run off with Fred Gillis when she was engaged to Jim Waldron. Nothing could erase that one hard fact. Now her kisses and her promises meant nothing.

Old man Gillis' words came back into his mind: *I wish to blazes she'd have married you instead of Fred. She would have if you'd had a pa who owned a spread the size of Circle G.* He was remembering other things, too; the expensive things she'd wanted, and he had told her he'd buy her all of them. Foolish! Crazy! His folks had been as poor as the Bilbos down in the river bottom, but nothing had seemed impossible when he had been twenty, and in love.

Martha hooked an arm through his with a proprietary air and led him into the cabin. "I knew you wouldn't fail me, Jim. I've thought of you so much all these years."

He sat down in a rawhide-bottom chair, stiffly and ill at ease. He had discovered something he should have known all the time. *A man could not go back.* She had married

Fred, she had been his wife, she had given him a son. All this time Jim had been thinking about her, dreaming about her, nurturing something he had thought was his love for her. Well, he had it straight now. It had been nothing but his battered pride. He'd held her in his arms and kissed her; but it hadn't been the same. Suddenly he felt like a free man.

She was bustling around the stove, filling the firebox with chunks of aspen, shoving the coffee pot to the front, slicing bacon, and now and then throwing him a smile. He remembered that smile. Sometimes it had been for him, and sometimes when they were dancing it had been for another man. He remembered how many times he had been forced to surrender her to another's arms. Then he'd gone outside and sulked. Maybe had a few drinks and usually wound up fighting the fellow she'd danced with.

"I'll have dinner right away," Martha said. "Tell me all the gossip. What's been going on? How are your folks?"

"My folks died last winter," he said. "Pneumonia. A week apart."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I hadn't heard."

SILENCE, then, except for the sizzling of the bacon. She popped a pan of biscuits into the oven and set the table. He began noticing things, little things that struck him as being queer. As far as he knew, the cabin had not been lived in for years, but the stove was cleaned up, there were enough dishes and pans for several people, and the shelves behind the stove were stacked with cans and sacks of food. The pile of wood behind the stove had been freshly cut and none of it looked as if a woman had done the chopping.

Jim rose. "I'll water my horse," he said, and went out.

There was a spring behind the cabin. He saw, with growing concern, that several horses had been watered here. Recently, too. He left his horse in the log shed. Just one other animal there now, but there had been two more. A half-filled sack of oats stood in the cor-

ner. He returned to the cabin, puzzling over what he had found, and not liking the conclusion he was forced to make.

"Almost ready," Martha said cheerfully. "I expect you're hungry."

He stood in the doorway, uneasiness working through him. He asked, "When did you get here?"

"Yesterday. I rode into town last night and mailed that letter. I was afraid to look for you." She straightened and faced him. "Jim, I'm just plain scared of old man Gillis. That's why I wrote the letter. I...I didn't want him to see me in case he was in town."

"He wouldn't have been in town," Jim said, and told her about the old man's accident.

"He deserved it," she said tonelessly. "I know that's not the right attitude, but I don't care. You know how he treated me." She turned to the stove, suddenly close to tears. "Maybe I didn't deserve anything better after what I did to you. I've made an awful mess out of my life, Jim. I...I hope I haven't made one out of yours."

He didn't say anything. There was nothing he could say. She'd messed his life up plenty, but there was no use telling her.

"You aren't married?" she asked.

"No."

"You will. You'll find the right girl and you deserve the best. I wasn't. I mean, it wouldn't have worked with us, but that doesn't excuse me for what I did."

She took the biscuits out of the oven and poured the coffee. Jim asked, quite casually, "Who's with you?"

She whirled, the coffee pot in her hand. "Nobody. Why?"

"Plenty of sign."

"Oh, someone was here just before I came. I don't know who it was." She set the coffee pot on the stove, eyeing him obliquely. "I've been in Denver, you know. Working and saving all the money I could."

"That your horse in the shed?"

"Yes. I bought him in Durango." She forked bacon into a tin plate and set it on the table. "I bought some grub. I knew about this cabin

and when I got here, I saw someone had been living here, but no one was around, so I moved in. It's all right, isn't it?"

"I reckon."

She motioned him to the table. "I hope whoever was here doesn't come back."

THEY ATE in silence, Jim watching her and trying not to let her know that he was. If she was aware of his covert glances, she gave no sign. She had not told him yet why she wanted to see him, nor did she until they were finished and Jim had pushed his chair back from the table and rolled a smoke.

She asked suddenly, sharp feeling flowing across her face, "How's my baby, Jim?"

He fired his cigarette, tossing the charred match through the door. Except for the way she had greeted him, he might have been any of a dozen men she had known before she had left Tenmile. Now her lips tightened. She was watching him closely, waiting for his answer, and he knew then why she had come back.

"The kid's fine," Jim said. "I saw him this morning."

She leaned forward, hands clasped. "Who does he look like, Jim?"

"You. Got your eyes and nose anyhow."

She laughed shakily. "He had them when he was a baby. I...I haven't seen him since he was two months old. Can you understand how that is, Jim? Four years and I haven't seen my baby."

There was misery in her now, honest sincere misery. He looked away, embarrassed by her show of emotion. He said, "Tough, all right."

"I've done a lot of things that were wrong, Jim, but I don't deserve this. I love Fred, but I guess he doesn't love me or he wouldn't have let me go like he did. He's just as scared of the old man as everybody else." She bowed her head, and added in a low tone, "Jim, I just can't let that old devil raise my boy."

"I'll tell you something you won't believe, but I saw how it was this

morning. The old man loves the kid."

She shook her head, eyes showing that she did not believe him. "You're just saying that, Jim."

"No, it's true."

She got up and walked to the door. "It doesn't make any difference, Jim. I'm his mother. I'm going to have him."

Jim rose and tossed his cigarette stub into the stove. He said, "Gillis is figuring on your making a try for him. He wanted me to get rid of you. Offered me a thousand dollars. Said to throw you into jail if I have to."

"That would be just like him." She laughed hysterically. "But I'm going to fool him. I'm going to take the boy away from him."

"You haven't got a chance, Martha. Not in this country. The old man's laid up, but he's just as ornery as ever. The court wouldn't let you have the kid."

She ran across the room to him and put her hands on his shoulders. "Jim, listen to me. Don't think about how I treated you. Hate me if you have to, but just think of one thing. Freddy is my boy. He belongs with his mother. Can't you see that?"

Her lips were very close to his; she pressed against him, and he was stirred as any man would have been stirred, but her kisses could not persuade him as they once had. She'd had the rough end of the stick all right, but he saw her now as just another woman who had run off from her baby.

He kept his arms at his sides. "You can't change anything, Martha. Don't try."

"I've got to, Jim. That's why I asked you to come here. I'm going to kidnap my boy. Don't try to stop me or take Freddy back to that old devil."

"You're talking crazy. First place you couldn't get him off Circle G. Or if you did, the old man would get a court order and I'd have to fetch him back."

"You could let me go away with him. You're the sheriff." She began to cry. "Jim, Jim, you were always

so fine and kind. I thought you'd understand."

She was counting on her tears working if her kisses didn't, he thought. He shook his head. "You can't take care of him. Anyhow, the old man gives him all he wants."

She was clinging to him now, fingers digging into his shoulders. "Yes, I can. I've got some money. I'm doing real well in Denver."

"What kind of a job have you got?"

She pressed her face against his shirt. "I'm secretary to a mining man."

She was lying again. She'd had very little schooling when she'd left Tenmile, and there was a mighty slim chance she'd had any business training in Denver. He pushed her away, saying, "I can't do anything for you. Maybe I'd think different if the old man was kicking the kid around, but he ain't. And don't forget that Fred's his father."

Jim walked to the door. He turned and looked at her. She stood beside the stove, rigid and gray-faced. He asked, "Who's with you?"

She breathed, "Nobody."

Another lie. Well, it was plain enough. She had sent for him, she had kissed him, she had cooked a meal for him, she had shed a few tears, all the time thinking she could persuade him to stand aside while she took the boy. He walked on across the clearing to the shed. Tightening the cinches, he mounted and rode away without looking back.

Later, riding through the aspens with the mottled shadows lying across the trail and the clatter of a woodpecker somewhere off to his right, he found himself thinking about it more clearly. He could see how a mother would feel about her child, but he wasn't sure about Martha. She might be prompted by her love for the boy, but again her motive might be revenge. Perhaps she was only trying to strike back at Fred and old man Gillis. He took a long breath, a worried tension gripping him. Either way, the kid was better off where he was. Anyhow, there wasn't much Martha could do.

CHAPTER IV

THE HARRIGANS

IT WAS well into the afternoon when Jim passed the lane that led to Circle G. He glanced toward the ranch, a vague uneasiness working in him that seemed to have no foundation. Jumpy, he guessed, but he couldn't forget that someone had been with Martha. If she had been entirely on the level, she would have told him the truth.

A dust cloud rose above the road ahead of Jim and presently he saw that it was Fred Gillis and the Circle G hands returning home. When he came up to them, he reined off the road and nodded. They nodded back in the short insolent way that was typical of Circle G riders. It was a quality the old man had instilled in them, a sort of overbearing insolence, but the thing which Jim had always found most surprising was the fact that of all the men connected with Circle G, only Fred was mild-mannered and friendly.

"See the old man?" Fred asked.

"Yeah, I was out this morning," Jim said. "I want to talk to you, Fred."

"Sure." Young Gillis reined off the road and motioned for the crew to go on.

Jim waited until the others had ridden on. He thought, with some surprise because he had never considered it that way before, that he should hate Fred because Fred had taken Martha from him. More than that, he resented Circle G's curt insolence; he resented the old man's power and constant effort to run everything in the Tenmile country including the sheriff's office. But nobody hated Fred Gillis. He had his father's big frame and green eyes, but he was easy-going like his mother who had died when Fred was a boy. Jim remembered her, and even then, as young as he had been, he had thought it strange that an old hellion like Gillis could have a fine wife like Fred's mother.

Fred was grinning uneasily. He

said, "I suppose Dad told you I'd heard from Martha."

They turned toward the ranch, riding slowly. Jim said, "Yeah, he told me. After I talked to him, I saw Martha. She's holed up in the Penrose cabin."

Fred stared at Jim, taking a moment to understand this. "What's she doing here?"

Jim told him, adding, "There's something fishy about the whole shebang. It's purty plain she's got a couple of men with her, but she denied it. I'm wondering why."

"I wouldn't have a guess," Fred said somberly. "Jim, I've never talked to you about Martha. Always been afraid to. I did you a damned dirty trick, and it's been surprising to me that you didn't beat hell out of me for it."

JIM GAVE him a flat-lipped grin. "I never figured you were to blame. I knew exactly what she could do to a man when she set her mind to it. I remember I couldn't take her to the dance that night, so she went alone. You just made the mistake of taking her home."

"That's right, but it wasn't really a mistake. You see, I really loved her. Still do. It was just that she couldn't manage Dad the way she was used to managing men." He was silent a moment, staring across the valley at the Circle G buildings. "I don't like it, Jim. She ain't here for no good. I got her letter a month ago, but I didn't answer it. Fact is, I didn't even tell Dad till yesterday."

"You wouldn't give the boy up, would you?"

"I couldn't. I just couldn't. Anyhow, she's got no right to him. Or not more'n part of the time." He brought his eyes to Jim. "Nobody knows this but Dad and me and the doc, but Dad's got a bad heart. Might kick off any time. It would kill him if we lost Freddy."

That was the greatest surprise Jim had received on this day which had brought many surprises. Somehow he had always thought of old man Gillis as being indestructible.

"Something else I want to tell you now that we're talking about it,"

Fred went on. "I know how Dad is. I mean, being his son don't make me blind, but he's been good to me. Maybe he loved me so much he was jealous of Martha. Anyhow, they sure didn't get along. Then she wanted me to go to Denver with her." He shook his head. "But I couldn't do that. Even for Martha. She left of her own accord, crying her eyes out because we wouldn't let her take the baby. Maybe she thought I'd come and bring Freddy. I dunno."

They rode in silence for a time, Jim thinking about what Fred had said. They had reached the lane turning off to the ranch when Fred straightened in the saddle. "What the devil, Jim! Look at Pete."

A Circle G rider was coming down the lane in a wild run, cracking steel to his mount at every jump. "Something's wrong," Jim said, and spurring his roan, reined into the lane, Fred beside him.

The cowboy was waving at them in great sweeping gestures, yelling something, and when they came up to him, Jim made out what he was saying. "The kid's gone and old Charley's beefed."

They swept past the cowhand who whirled his horse and followed, thundered up the lane to the house, and hit the ground running. Fred beat Jim through the door by a step and went on into the old man's bedroom. The cook, Charley Manders, lay on one of the bear rugs in the living room, sightless eyes staring at the ceiling, a shotgun beside him. Jim ran on into the bedroom.

Old man Gillis was in bed. One of the Circle G riders was beside him, saying, "I don't know how in hell he did it, but he got out of bed. He was on the floor over there by the window."

The old man seemed close to death. His face was gray; his green eyes were filled with a kind of wild fury Jim had never seen in human eyes before. His hands clutched the blanket that had been thrown over him, the knuckles white.

"Two of 'em," the old man whispered. "Freddy was in the other room. Charley was fixing a fishing pole for him. One of 'em gunned

Charley down when he grabbed a shotgun. The other one took Freddy."

Jim leaned over the old man. "What did they look like, Gillis?"

"Big. One was redheaded and had a beard. Other one wasn't so tall but he was thick. They didn't know I was here, I reckon. I couldn't get a gun. I got out of bed. Watched 'em. They went up on High Mesa. The old Indian trail."

Jim understood then. They were Rufe and Blaze Harrigan, as tough a pair as ever held up a stage or robbed a bank. *Martha had hired them to kidnap her boy.* That was the only guess which made sense.

The old man's eyes were on Jim, pleading. "Get him back. I'm cashing in, but I'll hang on till you get him back. I've got to know Freddy's safe."

"We'll get him," Jim said. "You coming, Fred?"

"Sure I'm coming," Fred answered.

They saddled fresh horses, working fast. Jim said, "They must have been watching from the rim. They knew you left with the boys early this morning and they saw me pull about the Indian trail. That's why I didn't see 'em. They probably came down while I was talking to Martha."

White-lipped, Fred said, "Damn her—!"

"Hold that," Jim said. "Maybe she didn't figure it would go this way."

They mounted, Fred trembling so that he almost dropped the reins. "Wasn't any other way she could figure it."

They went down the lane on the run and turned into the road, and all the time Jim was thinking they might be too late. He wasn't sure about Martha. She wasn't bad. Not this bad. But the Harrigans were.

CHAPTER V

GUNS IN THE AFTERNOON

JIM HAD never abused a horse the way he did on this ride. They swung up the steep trail that took them to High Mesa, Fred saying nothing. Jim sensed that

young Gillis wasn't thinking coherently. There would be just one thought in his mind, to get his boy back. Now, laboring up the switchbacks that took them to the mesa, Jim wondered if they'd get to the cabin in time. The old Indian trail was steep and crooked. The Harrigans would have to fight their way through a jungle of scrub oak after they reached the top.

They stopped a moment to blow their horses. Jim said, "They'd figure you wouldn't get back till night. That's where their luck turned sour. Strikes me there's a good chance we'll get to the cabin about the time they will."

Fred didn't say anything. The corners of his mouth were twitching. A muscle in his cheek was beating like a pulse. Then Jim thought about old man Gillis back there in bed, waiting to die. He didn't understand why it had gone this way. He didn't understand it at all, but once he'd heard a preacher talk about folks reaping what they had sowed. Old man Gillis had spent a lifetime sowing meanness. Now the one human being he loved more than he had ever loved anyone was in danger. The Harrigans were the kind who would kill the boy as soon as they'd kill a calf if they had trouble with him.

They went on through the aspens, the sun dropping westward, the mottled shadows still in the trail, the tiny leaves brown and sere under the driving hoofs. There was no question of trying to surprise the Harrigans, of approaching the cabin silently, no question of anything but getting there in time.

The clearing was just ahead then. Jim drew his gun. He glimpsed horses. Two men were in front of the cabin, one with a bright red beard, the other shorter and as thick of body as the trunk of a great oak.

Fred cried out and pulled his gun. Jim yelled, "No, Fred. Wait till we see Martha and the boy."

They came on into the clearing, the Harrigans apparently only then knowing they were there. Jim caught a glimpse of the boy, a huddled heap beside the cabin door.

Then he saw Martha on her hands and knees, trying to get to him, black hair stringing down her face.

Blaze Harrigan had his gun clear of leather, roaring out a great challenge. He threw a shot at Jim, and missed, for Jim was riding low in his saddle and coming fast. He swung his horse around, knowing this was up to him, for Fred had never been a fighting man and there could be no miracle that would make him one now.

The other Harrigan fired at Fred, knocking him out of his saddle in a rolling fall. Then Jim let go with his first shot and big Blaze Harrigan was thrown back against the cabin wall and his feet slid out from under him and he went down.

IT HAD taken time, that shot, too much time. Rufe Harrigan swung his gun toward Jim. Frantically Jim pronged back the hammer. He pulled trigger and missed, for his horse spooked by the gunfire, chose that instant to buck.

Jim spilled off his horse, somehow hanging to his gun. Rufe Harrigan fired, the slug kicking up dust a foot from Jim's head. The fall knocked the wind out of him. He lay there, paralyzed, able to see and hear but for what seemed an eternity there was no power of motion in him.

Then it happened, the one thing that could quiet the doubt which had been in Jim's mind from the moment he had told Fred, "Maybe she didn't figure it that way." Martha was on her feet, blood streaming down her face. She had Blaze Harrigan's gun in her hand and now she swung it squarely across Rufe's head.

Martha wasn't strong enough to give Harrigan a knockout blow, but she hit him just as he was squeezing off another shot at Jim. It threw his aim off and sent the slug screaming through space. Harrigan struck Martha a back-handed blow, knocking her down, but she had given Jim the time he needed. Flat in the dust, he tilted his gun upward and let go a shot that blasted Rufe Harrigan into eternity.

Jim came to his hands and knees, watching the big man go down. Only when he was sure that both the Harrigans were dead did he look at Fred. He had a shoulder wound and had been knocked cold by his fall, but he was not seriously hurt. Martha was on her feet, holding her head and swaying uncertainly. Jim walked past her and picking the boy up, carried him inside the cabin. The kid would be all right.

Martha was holding Fred's head in her lap, stroking his face and crying. She looked up when she saw Jim's shadow beside her. "Is...is he going to die?"

"He's all right," Jim said gruffly.

It was strange that at a time like this Jim Waldron would think of old man Gillis, lying in his bed very close to death. If he went on over the range before Jim got down off the mesa, he wouldn't know whether the boy was safe or not. Working swiftly, Jim tied both bodies face down across the saddles, and when he was done, he saw the expression Martha and Fred had on their faces, the expression of a man and woman in love.

"Blaze did it," Martha said in a low bitter tone. "Freddy was crying. Blaze wanted to keep on riding and I wouldn't go. Blaze hit me then he hit Freddy."

"Give us the yarn," Jim said sharply. "Tell it straight this time."

"Fred's bleeding..."

"He ain't hurt bad and I'm high-tailing down to tell the old man the kid's safe, but first I aim to get a straight story out of you."

Martha put a hand to her face. "I...I..." She looked directly at Fred then. "I haven't done many things I'm proud of. I married you for your money. Then I found out I loved you and I wanted to give you a son, but the old man..."

"I know," Fred said. "I should have gone with you. It'll be different from now on in. You'll see."

"I saved all the money I could," Martha went on. "I haven't thought of anything for four years but you and Freddy. I took all I'd saved to hire the Harrigans to steal Freddy

for me. I lied to you, Jim. I'm just a dishwasher in a restaurant."

"The Harrigans got another notion, didn't they?" Jim asked.

She nodded. "After they found out the old man was rich, they decided to make him pay to get Freddy back."

"You ought to have known you couldn't trust hombres like the Harrigans," Jim said.

"I couldn't think of anything else to do. I wanted my boy, and I thought maybe me and Fred..."

"Better get that shoulder fixed up," Jim said. He mounted and rode out of the clearing, leading the outlaws' horses behind him.

LATER, WHEN Jim stood beside old man Gillis' bed, he couldn't help thinking of what folks said about him being one corner of the universe, and what he'd said himself, about the old man outdoing the devil when it came to downright cussedness. Well, maybe it had been true in a way, but now the old man was dying, and it seemed strange that the greatest happiness he had ever known had been given him by a four-year-old boy.

Jim couldn't get the old man out of his head when he rode back to town. As long as he lived, he would never forget the expression that touched Gillis' craggy face when he'd told him the boy was safe. The old man was too far gone to say anything, but he had understood. Jim was sure of that.

A lot of lives had been tangled up. The old man's passing would not take the knots out, for too many people had fallen into the habit of blaming their troubles upon old man Gillis when actually they should have blamed their own weaknesses.

No one was all white and no one, not even the old man, was all black. That was a basic fact Jim knew he should have discovered a long time ago, but he had fallen into the same error of thinking as the rest of the Tenmile people. Now his mind, freed at last of what he had thought was his love for Martha, came to Betty Miller, and he touched up his horse, suddenly eager to see her again.

**SMASH FEATURE-LENGTH
NOVEL!**



Larry ducked and hit him in the mouth...

CUSTER, HERE WE COME!

by **WILLIAM HOPSON**

If gun-backed Texas cattlebarons were running their herds into Nations country, it meant Indians on the warpath. And if the Cheyennes and Comanches went on the prod, it meant massacre—with helpless homesteaders and ranchers whipsawed between hot lead and tomahawk, with a lone Army sergeant to hold off the bloody hell!

CHAPTER I

BACKSHOOTERS

THAT JULY afternoon Sergeant Larry Collins laid the last adobe brick in place on the new corral wall, brushed the mud and dirt from his work clothes, and turned to the two other members of Troop D, Eighth Cavalry.

He said, "Clean up your mortar boards and wash them. Stack those loose bricks and police up and then you can get ready for mess."

He strode off toward the small adobe room he shared with Quartermaster Sergeant Bud Blanton and began stripping down to bare flesh. The sigh that came from him was a little tired and a little disgusted.

"I came into this army to fight Indians," he muttered. "Not to double the size of every one-troop fort in the state of Texas."

Maybe Joe Travers had been right. Why give up a decent job of punching cows to become a trooper?

It wasn't the rigid discipline under sometimes martinet officers. Larry had taken to that like a duck to water. He liked drill and patrol and wasn't too averse to guard duty, two hours on and four hours off. What gripped him this particular afternoon was the fact that when he had joined up they found out that, as a fifteen-year-old, he served an apprenticeship in the building trades. It accounted for his rapid promotion to the rank of sergeant, but it also accounted for his new sore hands and deflated pride.

Like thousands of other youngsters, he had idolized Custer after the fight with Crazy Horse and his Sioux. So he finally quit his job with Stannifer and Blythe over in the Davis Mountain country and joined up. He did so in the face of goodnatured jeers from the other hands, including Joe Travers.

He and Joe had worked a good deal together on the ranges and in line camps and Joe was a pretty good man when he was out of town and sober. But just let him get into

town, or stop off at some out-of-the-way still where a bootlegger was cooking "Taos lightning" to sell to the Indians, and Joe became an entirely different person.

Larry removed his mud-stained clothes, got out his blues, wrapped a blanket around him, and headed for the shower room—built by Sergeant Larry Collins. The warm water came from a solar heating system mounted on the bear grass roof of the building.

As he emerged in full blues from the shower room he saw Sergeant Blanton coming from the warehouse office, and something in Bud's mien told of an inner excitement.

"Hey, Larry, wait up," Blanton called, and broke into a trot.

"Careful, boy," Larry warned as the other jogged onto the long porch fronting the row of quarters for the members of Troop D. "You know what exercise and sun does for a quartermaster sergeant. They're not used to it."

Blanton said, "You'll find out," and fell in beside him. "Well, feller, it's come. Captain Owens just got in word a little while ago. The Cheyennes and Comanches have gone on the prod up in the Nations country."

Larry looked at him sharply. "Massacre?"

"Not yet but there may be. From what I heard him say they're sore at the cattlemen up that way. Seems as though when they leased them range, there wasn't anything said about the cowmen building drift fences. So the Indians started cutting them down. That started some shooting from both sides and now the Indians say the cowmen are driving big herds of stuff over on lands not leased, and they either want the soldiers to come up there and clean out both cattle and cowmen or old Horse Mane of the Comanches says he's going to do it himself."

Larry whistled softly. This was rough stuff. Stannifer and Blythe were running close to fifteen thousand head up in that country on leases from the Comanches. Larry knew because he had almost gone up

from the Davis Mountain country to work on that part of their huge holdings.

"Anyhow," Bud went on, "that's what I got, listening to the old man and the other officers."

"When are we pulling out?"

"I dunno. Want to go into Del Rio tonight? Might be our last chance. Better have your fun while you can, soldier."

"Sure," Larry said.

FORT SAN FELIPE lay three miles from Del Rio, Texas, the land for it having been donated by a cattleman who wanted soldiers handy to impress the Mexican and American desperadoes who were raiding his herds. It was a one troop outfit—Troop D—under the command of Captain Owens. Owens was a good man but a strict disciplinarian. He believed in the axiom that a busy soldier didn't have time to become a grumbling soldier.

Larry and Bud Blanton went over to mess, filled up on bacon and beans and potatoes, and then walked over to tell the Officer Of The Day where they were going. As they led their mounts out of the 'dobe corral with its nine-foot-high fence, a voice called.

"Sergeant Collins!"

It was Captain Owens, coming across the parade ground from his office. Larry stepped forward and threw him a sharp salute with a gauntleted hand. Although he weighed but one hundred and fifty pounds, Larry Collins stood at an even six feet. When he had come into the Army, he had the long, curving spine so common among tall men in the saddle. Now he stood as straight as the barrel of a Sharps, shoulders square, spurred heels together.

"Sir?"

Captain Owens returned the salute, a West Pointer in his thirties; blond, compactly built, and wearing a short clipped mustache.

"Going in town, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. Be back by midnight. Tomorrow morning all construction will cease on the new corral. Full drill periods and complete overhaul

of all equipment. You will report to the Sergeant-Major in the morning for further instructions. That will be all."

"Yes, sir."

He saluted again and took the reins of his mount from Blanton and swung up. They clattered out past the trooper on duty at the gate and moved out into the flats below. Owens hadn't said anything about when the outfit would be on the move, but it probably would be soon. If the Comanches and Cheyennes were getting ready for trouble, you could be certain that the Army wouldn't lose any time getting into action. That made Larry feel much better. No more adobe bricks for awhile, at least....

They jogged into Del Rio just at sunset and swung down in front of Cartright's saloon, a big, sprawling affair of adobe. Out back of it was the town "jail," a huge corral made of adobe, the walls seven feet high. In the center was a huge boulder weighing nearly a thousand pounds and set in the top of it in mortar was a big iron ring. Attached to this ring were a dozen light chains forty feet in length with a handcuff on the free ends. Prisoners might have the freedom of the corral with a handcuff on one wrist, but any man who tried to escape would have to drag a thousand-pound boulder along.

Larry and Blanton went into the low ceilinged room where a dozen or so Mexicans lounged around, talking in Spanish and drinking raw *mezcal* and *tequila* at a nickel a hooker. A few riders and one or two owners of outfits drank at the bar, while over in the northwest corner the two second lieutenants from the post drank beer and talked cavalry tactics.

"Drink?" Bud Blanton asked.

"Not now. That ride didn't jolt down my supper enough."

Larry had never gone in much for liquor; just a few now and then. On the other hand, Bud loved the raw border stuff, and it frequently got him into trouble. Larry could tell the warning signs: Bud's cherubic face, mainly, would begin to turn a rosy pink. The last time it had

taken on that hue, they had spent two nights in the guardhouse and two days cleaning stables—because Bud had insisted on crawling into a horse trough to drink water “like a hoss does”, and pulled Larry in on top of him about the time Second Lieutenant Smith came along.

Bert Summers, the town constable, strolled in and said, “’Lo, Sergeant. How’s the sojer business?”

“Rough. How’s the constable business?”

“Quiet, thank the Lord.”

“No prisoners in the carcel?”

“The Mexican *rurales* came over and got that last man they wanted and I happened to nab. They took him across the line, made him dig his own grave, and then shot him into it. Colonel Morales says as how us *Americanos* are too soft-hearted.”

Larry knew. Those Mexican *rurales* who sometimes came across to drink with the soldiers in Cartright’s place were rugged customers.

SOUND CAME from without and hoofbeats grew in volume, followed by a rebel yell. A sixshooter boomed off into the night and there came shouts and laughter as spurs clanked. Probably some bunch from an outlying ranch in town for the first time in three or four months.

Nearly a dozen gun-packing cowpunchers entered, laughing and slapping one another on the back. Summers idled against the bar and said nothing. He never interfered unless somebody got hurt or killed—not an uncommon occurrence.

Then Larry saw a familiar, stocky figure and stiffened a little. A year or so ago he would have let out a yell of pleasure. But the rigid discipline of the Army was in his ramrod backbone now and he said nothing as he walked over. When Joe Travers saw him, Joe let out a whoop.

“Larry!” He came pounding over to shake hands. His breath reeked of the *mezcal* though he was not drunk. “Hey, fellers, look at the sojer boy! Look what’s happened to a first class cowhand. Just another damned trooper now, haw, haw!”

In that moment Larry suddenly realized more than ever before just

what the Army and that uniform meant to him. There had been times when he regretted the decision that had turned him from cowpuncher into soldier. Now he knew in a flash of intuition that those times would never come again. He was all soldier and the Army was his life.

He said, “Hello, Joe. Glad to see you again. What are you doing down this way?”

“Came down to pick up a thousand head Stannifer and Blythe bought and drive ’em back to the Davis Mountain ranges.”

“They seem to be getting bigger and bigger all the time.”

“Bigger! Do you have any idea how many cattle they sent up the trail last year from their Texas and Indian Nations ranges? *Thirty-four thousand!* Yessir! *Thirty-four thousand* head of cattle! Larry, you were a fool to quit ’em. You’d have had my job now. I’m foreman of Stannifer and Blythe’s Davis Mountain outfit. Come over and meet the boys.”

Larry went over and met them, hardcases all. Tough gun packers of the kind that had helped the two cattle barons run their herds from a half dozen Texas ranges all the way into the Indian Nations country, fighting Indians and anybody else who got in their way. Larry was convinced now, more than ever, that it had been a good thing to get out of the outfit.

Three of the men packed two guns. Three named Buck, Slim, and Pecos. Of the lot, Pecos looked to be the toughest; an angular man with sloping shoulders, a drooping yellow mustache, and a pair of fishy eyes. Larry wondered how many men he had killed in gun fights—and shot in the back.

“Come on over and have a drink,” Joe Travers suggested to Larry.

CHAPTER II

YELLOW DOWN THE BACK

LARRY HAD a small comradely beer which he didn’t want, but he did wish to ask about the old outfit and the men

he had ridden with. Joe drank three straight *mezcal*s and talked of riders who had come and gone; some drifted, some dead, some in the penitentiary. When talk finally began to drag, Joe Travers looked at him narrowly.

"Why don't you git back to a man's job?" he finally demanded.

"Trooping wasn't exactly cut out for a woman to do," Larry said thinly.

Joe sneered, the *mezcal* beginning to bring out his real nature. "A good cow punch can whip any half dozen of yore lousy troopers any day of the week, rain or shine. I can do it. But you done all wrong an' the outfit wouldn't make too much fun of you if you come back. O' course, they'd hoo-raw you a little but that's all. I'm foreman and I'd take care of 'em."

It was leading to trouble and Larry knew it. Trouble was the one thing he had always avoided and more so since he had donned a uniform. He and Joe had once been saddle pardners. Now they were no longer riding the same trails. Larry abruptly changed the subject.

"When are you pulling out with the herd?" he asked.

Joe gave him a liquor leer; something Joe thought was cunning. "We ain't. We got other orders today. We're headin' out to catch a train up into the Nations country. The war whoops up there are cutting our drift fences and killing good men. We're goin' up to clean out the hull territory, if we have to. Stan and Blythe are sending up a hundred gunmen to guard our drift fences.

"That's what I wanted to talk with you about. I want you to desert the army and meet us at Sandy Bend on the Galveston, Houston, and San-Antonio railroad. It's fighting pay—fifty a month. We can smuggle you in a box car an' have some clothes ready so's you can throw away that stinkin' uniform an'—"

It was the freezing eyes of Sergeant Larry Collins that stopped the rest and left it unsaid.

Joe grinned and said, "You won't, huh?"

"It's probably something you

wouldn't understand, Joe, but this uniform does something to a man. It gives him a different slant on things. I'm a trooper now."

Joe looked at the three yellow stripes on the blue coat sleeve and an ugly expression that was an open sneer came over his face.

"Yellow stripes. They fit you perfect. Only mistake they made was that they put 'em in the wrong place. They should be up an' down yore back."

Larry hit him then, a hard slashing blow that knocked Joe rolling along the bar and grabbing at it to keep from falling. Joe wheeled, his gun out and levelled. Then he slowly sheathed the weapon and began unbuckling his cartridge belt.

"It's lucky you wasn't packin' a gun or I'd a shot you dead. I'm glad now I didn't because I'm goin' to beat daylight outa you. I allus figgered I could do it anyhow an' now I'm goin' to prove it."

The two officers had jumped up and strode over. Bert Summers was moving in and the hardcase combine from Stannifer and Blythe stood motionless, ominously silent.

"Sergeant Collins," Lieutenant Smith said crisply, without raising his voice. "You will return to the post immediately and remain under quarters arrest until further notice."

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, no he won't," Joe snarled, and wiped at the blood on his mouth. "Not till I git through with him, he won't."

Smith eyed him coolly. "This concerns the Army, sir," and to Larry: "At once, Sergeant."

"Yes, sir."

"It concerns me too, mister," Joe sneered at him. "You ain't talkin' to one of yore damned troopers now. That bar on yore shoulders don't mean nothin' in my life. Buck! Slim! Pecos!"

The three moved out in unison, like some well-oiled team rehearsed for such a job. They said nothing, made no hostile move; just stood there... waiting.

"You keep outa this too, mister," Travers warned Bert Summers cold-

ly; and to the two officers: "And that goes double."

Smith ignored Joe as though he had not spoken. For all of his mien, Joe Travers had never spoken.

"Sergeant, you will return to the post as ordered."

"Yes, sir."

LARRY STARTED for the door, heard Joe's command, and turned. Joe held his coiled gunbelt and sheath in his left hand. There was a big sixshooter in the other, lined squarely at Larry's midriff.

"Larry, you make one move toward that door and you'll never git there," Joe said "Orders or no orders from this shavetail."

Larry ignored him and looked at Lieutenant Smith. "If you say go, sir, I'll go. But he called these stripes yellow, sir. Like yellow down the back. With your permission I'd like to fight him."

"That puts an entire different aspect on the picture. Permission granted, Sergeant—and do a good job of it."

"Let's go out in the jail yard where we can have plenty of room," Larry said.

"Boy, he's got you bested by fifteen pounds," Bud warned in a low voice as they moved toward the door, the crowd funnelling after them. "And he's got just enough tarantula juice in him to make it thirty. Keep away from him and don't let him get hold of you. You've got more wind than any man in the troop on account of being the best foot racer in the outfit. Use it."

Larry nodded and they strode on through the darkness to the open gate of the corral-jail. They went inside and Larry stripped off his tunic. He knew he had the wind. Foot racing was one of the recreational sports that members of the troop indulged in during off duty hours and he had been clocked at a little over eleven seconds in a one hundred yard dash. He knew Joe's style of fighting for he had seen him beat up a number of men during the days when they had ridden together. But fighting wasn't his game and he wanted none of it. The issue must be

faced, however, and he'd try to make the best of it.

Lieutenant Smith stepped forward and took his tunic and gloves and Larry removed his light spurs. One of the men was gathering up the chains and carrying them around beyond the rock to give the battlers plenty of room. The saloon had been drained of customers and now a silent ring of men stood in the darkness as Joe removed his heavy leather chaps and spurs. He came in circling warily in the familiar way Larry had seen before when Joe had whipped men in rough and tumble fights. He lashed out and Larry ducked and hit him in the mouth.

Bud Blanton let out a yell of pure glee. "I got twenty dollars, two gold eagles, that says Larry can take him. We army men stick together. Come on, you cow punches."

Three of the Stannifer and Blythe outfit were over in a hurry to cover the bet, as Larry caught a glancing blow on the cheek, stumbled and went down. The fight might have ended there had not Larry known what was coming next. He rolled aside as Joe jumped high and landed with booted feet to stomp at him, then snapped upright and bored in again. In the darkness the circle of silent men watched, the two officers off to one side. It was the *scuff-scuff-scuff* of feet in the powdery dirt, the thud of blows, some of which glanced lightly, the panting of two men.

At the end of fifteen minutes Larry had knocked Joe down three times and had a bad cut on his own lip. But his foot racing had given him wind and he bided his time, circling slowly, slashing, avoiding Joe's head-down rushes to knock him off his feet and get him onto the ground.

Another fifteen minutes went by and both were tiring badly, both conserving their strength, fighting cautiously and more slowly. Once Joe got him in a clinch and Larry had to use a knee in the other's stomach to break him loose. As Joe staggered back again, Larry Collins knocked him down again. His knuckles were bleeding now and dismay shot

through him as he saw the heavier man stagger to his feet once more. No doubt about it, Joe Travers, despite the drinking, was as hard as nails. But he was weakening and now Larry used Joe's favorite tactics to bring him down.

He dived head first into the other man's belly, knocked him off his feet, then fell atop him and slashed open both eyebrows with lightning blows. Blood spurted afresh from Joe's nose as the lightning blows landed again.

"I've....got enough," came in a pant. "For now..."

Larry rose and unconsciously felt of his bruised, skinned knuckles. The men helped Joe to his feet. He stood reeling, slobbering in gulps of fresh air, wiping at his bleeding face with a sleeve.

"Don't you worry, Larry," he panted. "We'll meet again....someday."

Sooner than you think, Larry's mind said fleetingly. We're going up in the Nations country too.

Bud Blanton loftily pocketed his winnings as Lieutenant Smith came over and held out the tunic.

"Very good job, Sergeant. The order confining you to barracks is rescinded. But you'd better get back to the post and have the doctor take care of your hands."

"Yes, sir," Sergeant Larry Collins replied.

THEY BEGAN hard drill the following morning, followed by the work of overhauling and replacement all worn equipment. It lasted for days while Captain Owens waited for orders to move out. When standard tactics grew monotonous Smith and Larry began riding around the compound, standing upright in the saddles and changing horses. It was part of the famous "Monkey Drill," in which two troopers riding side by side at a gallop held another man on their shoulders. Larry and Smith, riding hard at a run, could pick men off the ground and swing him up back of either of them.

They were all still at hard work when the orders to move out came

through. They loaded horses and equipment on the Galveston, Houston & San Antonio railroad, went north on the M,K&T, and finally switched to the Kansas Southern for the final leg of the trip. And in the dark of a midnight, up in Kansas, they piled railroad ties beside box car doors and unloaded horses and equipment. A quarter of a mile out on the plain they drove down picket stakes with iron rings in them, stretched taut ropes between the stakes, and haltered their mounts to the taut ropes and went into bivouac.

They were right on the northern line of Indian Territory. Some of the Second Cavalry were already there, having come in from Walla Walla, Washington, plus a couple of troops from the Third. The Third had over 350 battle stars in its flag.

That was all troops available. There were no more to be spared. The rest were spread out over hundreds of thousands of square miles of wilderness and frontier territory, holding down the more warlike tribes.

Bud Blanton eyed the distant fires that night and expressed what was in the minds of all of them.

"Seven hundred men!" he snorted. "And all we got to do is to go down and stop three thousand of the toughest Comanches and Cheyennes that ever straddled a rawhide saddle. *Custer, here we come!*"

Sometime in the early morning hours General Elwell Otis came in from Chicago on the train. He held an early morning inspection of the various Troops and then went into a long conference with all of the officers. Shortly afterward a trooper loped up to where Larry was picketing his mount on the line.

"Are you Sergeant Collins of Troop D, Eighth?" he asked.

"That's me," Larry nodded.

"You're wanted over at headquarters right away."

Now what, Larry thought and swung up. He loped back with the trooper and dismounted in front of the big tent that had been set up for the general. He saw Captain Owens with a group of other of-

ficers waiting out in front and saluted.

"Inside, Sergeant. Report to the General," Owens said.

Larry stepped inside, brought his six feet to ramrod stiffness, and snapped a gloved hand to his hatbrim.

"Sir, Sergeant Collins reporting to the General, as ordered."

Otis was a big heavy set man in his late fifties, a veteran of the Civil War of twenty odd years before.

He said, "At ease," and then looked Larry over with shrewd eyes. "Sergeant, Captain Owens informs me that you speak the Commanche tongue and talk sign language quite fluently."

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Where did you pick it up?"

"From two peaceful Indian families who lived near our old homestead, sir. We kids played together every day."

"Hmmm. Did you ever hear of old Horse Mane, the Commanche chief?"

"I've met him a number of times, sir. Mostly on trail drives. The last time I borrowed a horse from him following a slight—er—fracas in a Hays saloon with some of its citizens. I was in very much of a hurry to keep on going south."

A FAINT SMILE struggled through the General's bearded face. He knew these trail town cow punchers. They had fought often and bitterly with the troopers, and now many like this one wore blue themselves. Larry waited, not having mentioned that the flight south, ahead of an angry posse, had been caused by a puncher named Joe Travers getting drunk and shooting a man.

"Very well, Sergeant. You will draw provisions and find Horse Mane's headquarters. Inform the chief we're making a forced march with our wagons and will settle this thing without trouble between the soldiers and Indians. You will remain there until we arrive, probably tomorrow morning."

Larry saluted, spun about and left the tent. Captain Owens came over.

He and the other officers had overheard. "Sounds good, Sergeant. Looks like we can settle this without difficulty. A fight would be disastrous to the entire nation and the Indians."

"You have nothing to worry from Horse Mane, sir. He's a man of honor and won't break his word to the soldiers. It's Stannifer and Blythe I'm worried about, Captain. Stannifer in particular. He'll stop at nothing to gain his ends."

Over at the supply wagons of the 8th, Bud Blanton, in charge, whistled softly at the news.

"The General's ambassador, eh? How dew yew dew, Sergeant-Major Collins?"

Larry grinned at him, finished packing his saddle bags, and swung into leather again. "See you sometime tomorrow, dearie," he called back from a gallop.

"Watch out for them purty Indian sqaws," Bud bawled after him, the words drowned out in the drum of hoofs.

Larry turned almost due south, a little to the east, and let the army mount set a good pace. This was country he knew almost as well as he knew Texas. He had crossed it and recrossed it on many occasions, and he knew where old Horse Mane's headquarters were, because he had been there before. It was in an old abandoned encampment the Government had given him after he had signed a treaty to stop raiding and bring in his men.

Larry drove on all the rest of that morning, his own hundred and fifty pounds little burden to the longlimbed chestnut horse he was riding. He had picked that mount for his own and he knew what it could do.

He covered more than fifty miles, pausing at regular intervals to water and rest the animal and to cook himself a pot of coffee. The sun was still an hour in the summer sky when he topped a gentle rise and saw the plain below. What he saw sent a shock of dismay through him.

The plain around the big adobe building was alive with mounted Indians!

"Good lord!" he grunted in amaze-

ment. "Old Horse Mane must have brought in every Commanche and Cheyenne warrior in the Nations! This looks like trouble."

CHAPTER III

MATTER FOR THE ARMY

IT WAS. He could tell from the milling horsemen, their wild dashes here and there, their sham battles with each other, that they were primed. At least four hundred were around the building and something more than a mere drift fence had stirred them up. Larry could sense it.

He drove forward at a lope. A group of Cheyennes spotted him and let out shrill yells and spurred at him. They cut past him at a run, only a heel visible over the backs of rawhide saddles and, at a dead run, thrust black arms beneath the necks of their horses and made shooting motions. Larry's horse leaped violently as another spurred past and slashed it across the rump.

He galloped down the slope and around the corner of the veranda and pulled up in front of the huge adobe edifice. He saw the dozen or so saddled horses and the saddles were not of rawhide. He saw the light wagon and span of mules.

White men.

There were at least three hundred warriors, all mounted, sitting their horses in a big semi-circle in front of the building, silent, waiting for something; entirely unlike the younger bucks cavorting around out on the plain among the teepees. Larry saw by their feathered head-dresses, rawhide head coverings, the conchas and beads, that all were sub-chiefs above warrior rank. Every concha, every feather, told of the man's rank, his tribe, his standing in battle, his victories. Larry stopped his horse beside the others and stepped across the porch into a huge room, into an atmosphere deadly and ominous.

At one side of the room, fingering their guns and looking very uneasy, stood the same dozen or so hardcase

riders led by Joe Travers that Larry had seen in Del Rio the night of the fight. Seated at a table were both Stannifer and Blythe. Stannifer was big, bold looking, hard-faced and arrogant, the contempt for an Indian plain in his angry face. Blythe was older, thin, a little better dressed.

Stannifer was making no attempt to conceal his rage as he looked at the dark, imperturbable face of old Horse Mane himself. Back of the old Commanche, arms folded across their chests, their equally dark faces impassive, stood a dozen top chiefs, both Commanche and Cheyenne.

Stannifer was shaking an angry finger at old Horse Mane. "I don't give a hang what you say!" he roared. "We kept our part of the bargain. We paid you for the leases and that gives us a right to put up drift fences. If we didn't have 'em they'd drift down here and you'd live on fresh beef without the Government paying anything for it. When the leases are up we'll tear down them fences. But they're up and, by God, they're going to stay—"

He broke off as Larry's tall, blue-clad figure came through the doorway. Old Horse Mane's black eyes flicked to Larry's, remained expressionless. Whether the old warrior recognized him or not in the uniform was doubtful. Horse Mane spoke some English and if he wasn't getting all that Stannifer had said he was surely getting the gist of it.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" Joe Travers burst out. "It's the sojer boy himself!"

Joe's face still bore faint signs of the fistic encounter between the two of them in the Del Rio jail yard a few weeks before and, for that matter, so did Larry's lip and knuckles. Stannifer rose to his feet, narrow-eyed.

"Didn't you used to ride for us?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir, I did."

"Soldier now, eh? What're you doing down here?"

LARRY IGNORED the questions; the soldier in him. He turned to Horse Mane and extended

a hand. "It is good to see my old friend, the great chief Horse Mane, who gave me a fresh horse when the guns went boom-boom in the town two summers ago. Did the horse come back?"

Larry had promised to send back the horse he borrowed, but Horse Mane had only said, "Turn um loose. Him come back."

Now the nearest thing to a grin possible to him grew on the old warrior's almost black face. He unfolded an arm, extended a hand, said, "How. Him come back."

Stannifer stepped forward authoritatively. "You speak this language?" he demanded.

"I do, sir."

"Then tell this old—"

"I'll tell him nothing at all, sir. A few more of the wrong words and this can end in a massacre right here in this room. I'd advise you to wait until General Otis and his men arrive tomorrow to straighten this thing out."

Fresh anger sprang into Stannifer's already flushed face. He was a millionaire cattle baron who numbered the company's critters in the thousands and tens of thousands. And such a man who had, with his pardner, put thirty-four thousand head up the trail in one year wasn't used to having anybody, particularly a former employee, tell him what to do.

"Any time I want advice from the Army I'll ask for it," he snapped.

"I'm not advising, sir—I'm ordering," Sergeant Larry Collins replied. "Get your men out of here without further talk."

"The devil I will!" exploded the angry cattle baron. "I'm running this show, young fellow."

"Not any more, sir. These Indians are under the jurisdiction of the United States Army, and that's me until higher authority arrives. Get your men out of here. And, Mr. Stannifer, if those objects beneath the tarp in your wagon are what I think they are, then I advise that you get rid of them before I have a chance to visit your camp. Because if I find any liquor, you'll be placed under

military arrest until General Otis arrives."

Old Horse Mane had stood in silence, he and the chiefs back of him; nor did they move as Stannifer gave off with a string of oaths. The tirade was ended by Blythe, who rose from his chair.

"The sergeant is right, Stan," he said. "This is a matter for the soldiers. Come on, boys, let's get out of here while we've got whole skins. I'm glad you came along, Sergeant. Things were getting out of hand."

"I'll see you at your camp tonight, sir."

"You come snooping around that camp and I'll have your head shot off," Stannifer threatened. "I mean it!"

Larry ignored him and the silent men, now very much relieved at the new turn of events, filed out. Joe Travers came by and looked Larry hard in the eye.

"I haven't forgot," he said. "The first time I get a chance to line my sights on you, you're goin' down."

Larry didn't reply, standing tall and ramrod straight. He wasn't aware of it, but old Horse Mane and the other chiefs were very much impressed. A good pow-wow with the General, a little ceremonial pipe smoking, perhaps a feed of barbecued beef, and things would work out all right.

Larry went over to Horse Mane and delivered the message, adding sign language as he talked the gutturals he remembered so well. "Tomorrow before the sun is high in the sky the great soldier chief comes from far away to talk with Chief Horse Mane. He will smoke the pipe of peace and discuss how to settle this thing. He says the Indians are his friends and will remain peaceful as they promised, because Horse Mane is a man of honor."

A FEW OF the chiefs stirred. Horse Mane thought it over. That was the way with the Indians in a pow-wow. You spoke simply. They thought long and carefully before making a reply. You thought

it over long and carefully—or appeared to ponder deeply—then spoke again. That was why pow-wowing over a comparatively simple matter could run on into hours.

Finally the old chief made reply. "We will wait until the big chief comes. But the fences on our lands must go. And the great hordes of cattle that come down like the locusts to eat our grass must go. I have spoken."

Larry nodded and turned, knowing that those cattle hadn't drifted. Stanifer and Blythe had deliberately driven them down by the thousands onto land not leased. Anyhow, there would at least be no trouble between Indians and soldiers.

He went out into the late evening sun, relief flooding through him that he had arrived when he did. Stanifer was used to having his own way, of riding roughshod over anybody who opposed him, and the situation was almost at the exploding point. He was in the seat, picking up the lines, when Larry strode out. Around the wagon, in a nervous ring, sat the hardcase riders led by Joe Travers. And now, massed around them, were at least four hundred warriors . . . just waiting, and hoping, for the signal to smash in with lance, bow and arrow, and gun.

"Just remember what I told you, young fellow," the cattle baron warned. "You keep out of my camp."

Larry swung up without reply. He forced his way forward in front of the mules and the sullen, now silent warriors backed their horses enough to open up a path. Their black eyes smouldered with hatred for the wagon and the riders. The little cavalcade went through and Larry escorted them for a mile west until they were clear of the cavorting younger warriors. Then he turned off and rode to the creek a half mile away where he watered his horse, rubbed him down carefully, staked him out in the lush grass near the willows, and made a simple camp.

He built a fire and went to work with hardtack, jerky, and some cooked beans Bud had ordered the cook to put up in an oilskin sack.

He ate leisurely, finished off the last of the coffee, rolled a cigarette and smoked. Despite the sixty-miles-or-so ride, he was not tired. He had spent his life in the saddle and his slim body was as hard as nails. All in all, he was satisfied. As a Captain during the Civil War, General Otis had built his reputation by driving his men to the point of exhaustion—which accounted for the stars of a major general now on his shoulders. Larry knew that he'd scarcely left Bud with his provisions when the various troops would be on their way. Twenty-five miles a day was fair time, but Larry was willing to bet Otis wouldn't stop except long enough for the men to eat. He'd shove his supply wagons and troops right on through the moonlight and come in pretty early in the morning.

Mechanically he cleaned his single shot .45-70 Springfield rifle and checked the loads in his service pistol, for he had no illusions about Joe Travers. He was leading a hardcase crew and it had made of him a meaner man than the one Larry had ridden with down in the Davis Mountain country.

Larry lay back on his saddle and thought that one over. The plain for miles around was alive with hundreds of cooking fires in front of lodgepole teepees. A group of Indian boys herded some horses out to night pasture and several bucks crossed the creek on horseback carrying the butchered and cut up carcass of a beef. One gave off a shrill, defiant yell at the lounging figure in blue and made obscene gestures—the Indian's favorite way of showing contempt. Darkness settled down, warm and quiet, and the plain faded into nothing. Nothing except the wink of distant camp fires.

CHAPTER IV

TEXAS DYNAMITE

TWO MILES to the west of where Larry Collins lay smoking and letting his mount rest and fill up on grass, Stanifer and

Blythe and their men hunkered around another fire by the same creek. Stannifer sat on a goods box with his back to a wheel, eating from a tinplate. He was still angry over the incidents of the afternoon. Blythe ate silently and said nothing.

"Blamed old fool," the bigger man finally grunted sourly. "If he'd used a little sense we coulda settled this thing, give them the whiskey to seal the bargain, and everybody woulda been happy. We coulda kept our drift fences and kept shoving stuff down on their unleashed ranges. But no, he knows he's got them soldiers back of him. What burns me up is the way them blue coats kow-tow to them stinking Indians."

"You shouldn't have lost your temper," Blythe said. "Those Indians don't think like we do."

"Thank the Lord for that," Stannifer muttered. "If I had my way about it, we'd get enough soldiers to round up every buck and squaw and papoose and put them on a reservation. They've got millions and millions of acres of good grazing land; all that land for a bunch of stinking, unwashed war whoops to do nothing with except hunt deer and antelope. By rights it belongs to us and I'm not backing down."

"You think that young trooper will come down tonight?"

"He will... and it'll be unhealthy for him when he does. I'm tired of getting kicked around by these yellow stripes."

"The devil, Stan, you can't buck the Army and you know it," Blythe protested to his more belligerent partner. "And Horse Mane signed a treaty *only* with the soldiers!"

Stannifer almost glared. The waiting men, faces over their plates, said nothing. Stannifer said, "For fifteen years you've been saying things just like that. It was me that overrode you and kept right on building bigger. I don't aim to stop now. So they'll send down the soldiers, will they? Well, that's just fine. All we need is a good war to get the Indians put on a reservation and, by hell, I'm going to start one! Joe!"

"Yea?" Joe Travers said.

"Hurry up and finish eating. When you get done you take them whiskey kegs out of the wagon and go hide 'em someplace where that sergeant can't find 'em. Tomorrow mornin' I'll go up and apologize to Old Horse Mane and then tell him where him and his chiefs can find all that liquor. Then we'll quietly slip out."

"By the time them blue coats pull in here the Indians will be roaring drunk and mean. You know how whiskey affects an Indian. They'll forget that treaty quick! We'll start a war tomorrow that'll end up with every Indian on a reservation and millions and millions of acres of free land for the outfit that can take it ... meaning us. The biggest land grab the west ever saw!"

"Stan, I don't like it," Blythe protested in his mild way.

"Of course you don't like it. We're the biggest outfit in Texas today because of me doing the things you never liked. Hurry it up, Joe!"

Travers rose and beckoned to Slim, Pecos, and Buck. Stannifer grinned now, his former black mood of moments ago now past. Blythe rose too.

"I think I'll turn in," he said. "And I still don't like it. We're playing with dynamite."

"Tomorrow it'll go boom-boom," Stannifer chuckled softly.

THE FOUR men went to the wagon, brought out the four big kegs of whiskey from beneath the tarp, and carried them off into the night, into a brush patch. Pecos managed to get one of the bungs loose and they had a couple of drinks apiece.

"Better take about one more," Travers suggested. "We got work to do tonight. I been thinkin' plenty the past couple hours."

"Work?" Slim asked quietly.

"Boy, an' how we got work. I got a score to settle with Larry on account of that fracas down in Del Rio that night. Now just what do you suppose would happen if a certain sojer was found in the mornin' with his throat cut? Right in the

middle of an Indian camp, with maybe parts of his uniform and stuff scattered around in plain sight? The General will blow in here and find his man dead and a bunch of drunk war whoops on the prod. He'll blow the roof sky high fer sure and lock horns.

"And while the Nations country is full of sojers, we four will be throwin' a road brand on every critter we can git hold of. We'll put out own herd up the trail this fall. Then it'll be New Orleans for the winter with plenty of money fer drinks and gals! How does it sound?"

"Just right," Pecos said. "But no more drinks." He drove in the bung with a gun butt.

They had just returned to the fire when the sound of a walking horse came through the night, and Sergeant Larry Collins rode into the circle of light. He sat his horse for a moment, aware of the ring of hostile faces, then swung to the ground.

"Good evening, sir," he said to Stannifer. "I believe you know why I'm here."

Stannifer waved in a surprisingly friendly gesture around the camp, not at all in keeping with his former belligerent attitude.

"Look around, Sergeant. You'll find nothing out of order. I'm dog-goned sorry about what happened up at the house. Just lost my temper. We want to see this thing settled peaceably as much as you blue coats do."

Larry nodded and strode over to the wagon, checked through the sacks and boxes of supplies, gave the bedrolls a fleeting glance. He saw Joe standing a little apart, Pecos and the man Slim close by. They had him braced, in case of trouble. He'd seen too many gun fights not to know. They could kill him and hide his body and nobody would ever know what happened. If his remains were ever found, they could blame it on the treachery of the Indians.

"Well?" asked Stannifer.

"Where are the rest of your men, sir?" Larry asked.

"What men?"

"Joe here said down in Texas that there are one hundred or more up here to hold your drift fences against the Indians."

"That's exactly where they are—camped along a seventy-five mile stretch of three-strand wire fence. With orders to kill any Indian found carrying a pair of wire cutters."

"Then I advise you to rescind that order, sir. This is strictly a military affair and unilateral action will not be tolerated."

Ever since he had first become a trooper, Larry had been most impressed by the manner in which the West Pointers chose their words and delivered them. He had listened carefully, scribbled the words on pieces of paper, and later looked them up in the dictionary, trying to speak as the officers spoke—clearly, crisply, and never raising his voice above normal level, no matter the situation. Those old days of joyous whoops, goodnatured cussing, oaths of pain when hurt—such things were alien to him now.

"There goes that 'advising' business again," Stannifer grunted, his temper rising. "I never in all my damned life saw so much advice being given. Seems like that's all the Army does—give advice. So now I'll give you some, young fellow: You get out of this camp and I advise you to stay away from it!"

Larry went to his horse and swung up and rode off into the night at a walk. He left silence behind him at the fire. Blythe lay propped up on an elbow, reclining on his bedroll.

"You kind of have to take off your hat to that young fellow," he remarked. "He's all business and he looks as though he's not afraid of the very devil himself."

"Just another good cowhand gone to the dogs," Joe Travers sneered. "He was a good puncher 'till them stripes went to his head."

THE FIRE died down and the man serving as cook did not replenish it. Presently, one by one, the men turned to their bedrolls. After a time Joe Travers edged over to

where Stannifer sat on the goods box. He spoke in a low tone. Stannifer listened, looked thoughtfully into the coals, and nodded.

"Glad you thought of it, Joe. It'll put a cinch on this little jamboree. Old Horse Mane's a pretty shrewd Indian and might have held down his whiskey bucks. But with a dead soldier on hand, it won't hold down the *blue coats*!

"Better mutilate him a little and scatter his clothes and stuff around. Hide his guns so's they'll think the Indians stole 'em, and drive his horse into one of the Indian herds. Make it just before daylight. Then, as soon as I report the whiskey, we'll pull outa here fast. But I'd sure like to be around and see the fireworks when they start," he laughed softly.

He went to his bedroll and the hours wore on. Quite some time before daylight, Joe Travers rose from his bunk, tapped Pecos on the shoulder, and began pulling on his boots, careful to make no noise that would arouse the others. But two others, Buck and Slim, came awake. "We're going," Travers whispered. "You fellers stick around and help git outa here fast when the time comes. Hell's shore goin' to pop around this place in a few hours."

He and Pecos slipped into the darkness and the man Buck looked over at Slim, grinning a little and nodding his head in the direction of the distant brush clump across the creek, where the kegs had been hidden.

"Why, shore," chuckled the other. "Might as well git our share of it before them stinkin' war whoops guzzle it up. Nothin' like a couple of early mornin' nips to wake up a good man."

To the east of them, Travers and Pecos rode at a walk. After a mile Joe got down and removed his spurs. "He'll be camped som'ers along this side of the creek among the willows," he whispered.

He handed up the reins of his mount and began working his way along in advance, pausing at intervals to drop flat in order to outline a picketed horse. They made it, yards at a time, for another mile,

and finally Joe came slipping back once more.

"I found him," he whispered up. "He's over there about a hundred and fifty yards and sound asleep. Get down an' take off your boots."

They crept forward in their socked feet, boots in hand, making no noise. In Pecos's belt was a long-bladed knife. They crawled the final fifty yards and came out into a small clearing among the willows, near a big cottonwood tree. The picketed horse stood motionless. Once it raised its head and slobbered ever so softly and then was still again. They saw the outlines of Larry on his blanket, tunic thrown over the upper part of his body, and Joe put his lips to Pecos's ear.

"Go for his belly with the knife while I use a gun barrel. No shootin'."

CHAPTER V

IN LINE OF DUTY

THEY WRITHED forward again on their stomachs, an inch at a time. They heard Larry's gentle, regular breathing, gathered their muscles, and sprang together.

Something unexpected happened then. Larry's booted feet lashed out with muscles trained in foot racing and caught Pecos squarely in the belly, jack-knifing him gruntingly. As Joe swung, his gun barrel bounced glancingly off Larry's left arm, and from out of the night another gun barrel lashed up and caught Travers squarely across the temple. Joe went down like a pole-axed steer and Larry's body did an acrobatic upright flip, landing him on his feet as Pecos stumbled in. Larry grabbed the would-be killer's knife wrist and lost his gun in the struggle. He threw all of his weight and strength into a grip on the wrist and tried to drive his knee into the other's groin. They twisted, locked legs, and fell; and Pecos lost the knife. He was over on top of Larry Collins now, trying to get at his throat, and panting, "Gotcha now, damn you!"

Under his back Larry felt something hard grind into the muscles beneath the shirt and knew it was the knife. He twisted aside, let go, and got possession of the deadly, close-fighting weapon. This time it was Peco's turn to grab for a wrist with both hands. He got the hold and began to jerk savagely, back and forth, trying to force it into Larry's throat for a side cut. They came erect through sheer straining of bodies.

Larry wilted suddenly and it threw Pecos off balance. He locked a leg back of the other and lunged his weight forward. They crashed down, Pecos over backwards, and the point of the keen-bladed knife went straight into the killer's throat.

Larry rose to his feet and stood there for a moment, panting and swallowing hard, before he remembered Joe. Joe was up on his knees, dazed, and wiping at a smear of blood running down the side of his face. Larry jerked him to his feet and picked up his own gun.

"All right, Joe," he said crisply. "Where's your horse?"

"Back there 'bout two hundred yards," Joe Travers mumbled. "What happened to Pecos?"

"A knife fell on him. You come over here where I can see you and stand by while I saddle. Consider yourself under military arrest for attempted murder on property under Government supervision."

He slipped on his tunic and saddled swiftly while Joe sat down and put on his boots and let go with a few muffled groans. Under Larry's cold-eyed questioning, he told what had been planned. Larry looked at the sky. It wasn't so dark now. He had to get to those whiskey kegs and destroy them quick!

Just let some of those wild young bucks get loaded up on that rotgut stuff and even old Horse Mane, who didn't drink, couldn't stop them from charging into anything they saw, soldier or cattleman!

He drove Joe ahead of him, made him unsaddle and turn loose a horse that Pecos wouldn't need any more, and they crossed the creek with its

four inches of water. On the south side they hit west, Larry's face grim. He knew that in attempting to arrest a dozen men, with two of them at least—Buck and Slim, professional gunmen—there would be little doubt of the outcome. He'd go down under their gunfire and the Indians would be blamed.

He was playing squarely into Stanifer's hands and he knew it. But there was a thing called in *line-of-duty* and a trooper hewed to it. Joe sensed what was in Larry's mind and grinned despite the pain.

"Here's where you go out, sojer boy," he chuckled. "Stan warned you a second time not to come back."

Larry didn't answer. It was daylight now, enough that he could see and hear the yelling and whooping of mounted young bucks far away on the plain. The Indian camp had come alive.

JOE TRAVERS led the way straight to a thick clump of brush about one hundred yards or so from the creek. He swung down and Larry followed him as they pushed aside the limbs and entered a small clearing. They both stopped and stared down at the two lax figures on the ground. The two men Buck and Slim were a mass of blood and torn clothing. They had been lanced almost to pieces. And the four big ten gallon kegs of strong whiskey were gone!

"Gawddlemighty!" Joe burst out. "It's Buck an' Slim! Their throats are cut!"

"Yes," Larry Collins replied, reading the signs that told a plain story. "They slipped out to get a few drinks and they didn't know a bunch of mean young bucks were hanging around in the brush, hoping to steal something from the men they hate. What they got was plain dynamite. Get across that creek quick, Joe! There's no time to lose."

They hit leather and spurred at a lope down to the creek and then splashed across and up to the camp. The men were up, waiting for breakfast. Hobbled horses, brought in by a night guard, were nearby.

"Where's Pecos?" Stannifer demanded harshly, as Joe dismounted and moved over to one of the dead men's bunks.

He swooped and came up with a gun in his hand. "He's dead, boss," he gritted, his eyes flaming into Larry's. "Knifed, an' now I'm finishin' up the job here instead of down at his camp. You won't have to go see Horse Mane about the whiskey, Stan. A bunch of bucks already got it, killin' Slim an' Buck, who were over sneakin' a few."

"Mr. Stannifer," Larry said crisply, "you can consider yourself and all of your men under military arrest pending the arrival of the soldiers this morning, under command of General Otis."

Stannifer began to laugh softly. Two more dead men, killed by the Indians, plus this soldier, would really sew up the situation. All they had to do was kill him and pull out.

"I warned you, young fellow. I told you not to come back to this camp again. And now you've not only played right into our hands but you've helped us start a war. Collins, it's too bad you didn't stay with us on the ranch as a rider. You could have been with us today instead of going out because you're against us."

Larry Collins turned in the saddle. He said, "No, Mr. Stannifer, I believe it's the other way around. You are on your way out. You wanted the Indians to have whiskey. They've got it and drunk it all up. You wanted them to start trouble and do some killing. You have your wish. There they come at a run!"

Stannifer looked. His face blanched and he let out a yell to start saddling. Out on the now light plain came at least four hundred young warriors in a bunched-up line three hundred yards long. There could be no doubt as to what they had in mind. A massacre, with Larry Collins on the wrong side.

Joe Travers whirled to face Larry again, found himself looking down the barrel of a service revolver, wheeled with a yell and dived for his saddle and bridle. Larry had thought

that troopers could, from long training, saddle fast, but the speed with which Stannifer and Blythe threw leather on the horses of the two dead men out in the brush equalled anything he had ever seen before. They all hit leather fast.

"Let's go, men!" roared Stannifer's voice above the noise of the confusion. "We'll hit for the drift fence thirty miles away an' try to hold 'em off until the damn soldiers get here to protect us."

Larry had spurred in beside him. "You will not sacrifice the rest of your men up there on that fence because of your own stupidity. You will ride as I direct, and under military arrest."

"Hell you say!" Stannifer flung out.

They spurred at a run along the creek, flashing around brush clumps. streaking westward, Larry bringing up the rear. They had the advantage of fresher horses, even though they were "cold"—the Comanches and the Cheyennes having come nearly two miles at a fast clip.

But a plains Indian, like the Apaches, had a way of getting more out of a horse than any rider in the world and Larry knew they were in for it. Even if they did outrun the pursuing warriors, Larry Collins knew that, when they had escaped, nothing short of death awaited him at the hands of this tough, hard-bitten crew.

They held the hot pace for nearly a half mile and Larry gradually drew up alongside of Stannifer, his long legged Army mount already warmed up and taking the run with ease. Blythe was riding abreast, doing a surprisingly good job of horsemanship despite his age. Joe Travers spurred in, close by.

"Swing over a bit to the north sir, and give the warriors time to straighten out and follow us," Larry called. "I'll tell you where to go."

"I'll tell you where to go!" roared back the cattleman and jerked out his sixshooter.

He fired one shot before Joe Travers, spurring on the near side, wheeled in the saddle and started

firing. His weaving body blocked Stannifer's erratic aim and Larry opened up on Joe with the service pistol.

A running gun fight on horseback, pursued by several hundred liquor inflamed Indians!

Larry fired three times at Joe from a distance of thirty feet and then saw him sag in the saddle. He slumped forward, the reins fell from his hand, and then Joe was lost somewhere back there in the dust while his frightened mount ran on.

Stannifer was firing again and Larry returned it, expecting a shot in the back any minute from the men behind. With the last load in his pistol he made a lucky shot, the ball breaking the cattle baron's right elbow. Stannifer let out a scream of pain and Larry, empty pistol in his hand, looked back.

But the riders were bent low in saddles, looking back over shoulders, plain terror in their faces.

Larry shot in alongside of Stannifer and turned the horse to the north and west. They went for another mile, now galloping, even trotting at intervals.

They swung north, the mass of horsemen behind coming on like an all-engulfing wave. He saw more horsemen far to the east—a mere dark blob—and knew they were probably cutting north to join the fray and try to head off the fugitives.

Suddenly, Larry cried "Take a look ahead, Stannifer!"

Out there, down the declivity from the rise they had topped, he saw the long line of wagons coming. He heard, or imagined that he heard, the call of bugles, when he saw the dusty columns suddenly break into a run and form an abreast battle formation. They drove their horses on and in a matter of minutes rode straight into the lines. Right up to the wagon where old General Otis sat talking with a warrior who plodded along beside the left front wheel.

Old Horse Mane himself!

Horse Mane spurred his pony out and his arm went up in some kind of a signal. Out there three hundred

yards away the line of horses began to slow from a gallop to a walk, came on, and finally stopped about one hundred yards away.

Larry pulled up at the General's wagon as the long line of blue stopped. Stannifer was gripping his broken right elbow with his bloodied left hand.

"General, I demand Army protection for me and my men against these dirty, treacherous red devils," Stannifer cried out hoarsely. "I demand the arrest of this sergeant for killing two of my men in cold blood and shooting me through the arm."

GENERAL Otis took his time in replying. He spat a stream of tobacco juice over into the grass and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Old Horse Mane sat in silence, his black eyes glinting just a little.

Before he could reply Blythe suddenly spurred to the fore, close beside old Horse Mane.

"General, my pardner is a liar. This mess is his own fault. He brought in four kegs of whiskey over my protests to try and placate the Indians. When he lost his temper yesterday during a pow-wow, the only thing that saved our lives was the courage of this young sergeant here.

Stannifer planned to let the Indians get at the whiskey this morning, get them drunk and into a fight with your soldiers...all to grab off more grazing lands from the Indians. But this sergeant, for the second time, saved us from being massacred by bringing us through to the soldiers."

The General chewed a bit more and finally looked at Larry. "I've just been talking with Horse Mane through our interpreter, Sergeant, and he's told me pretty much of what happened. Said his treaty was with the soldiers and not with any grass stealing cattlemen. So when a bunch of his young bucks showed up in camp before daylight with a few kegs of whiskey from the camp of these cowmen and got drunk he told 'em to go out and kill every one. He didn't know, of course, that you'd be caught in the chase, Sergeant."

(Please Turn To Page 127)

LEAVE YOUR HOLSTER

NEW FEATURE-LENGTH NOVEL OF INTRIGUE ALONG
THE DARK TRAILS!



CHAPTER I

TOUCHING her spurs lightly to the flanks of the pinto pony, Sally O'Harra felt him bunch beneath her, then scramble quickly across the loose shale and leap lightly to the edge of the rim-rock. The wiry little horse stood trembling for a moment until he felt the reassuring slap of the girl's hand on his neck, then he relaxed. She dismounted and dropped the reins, and the

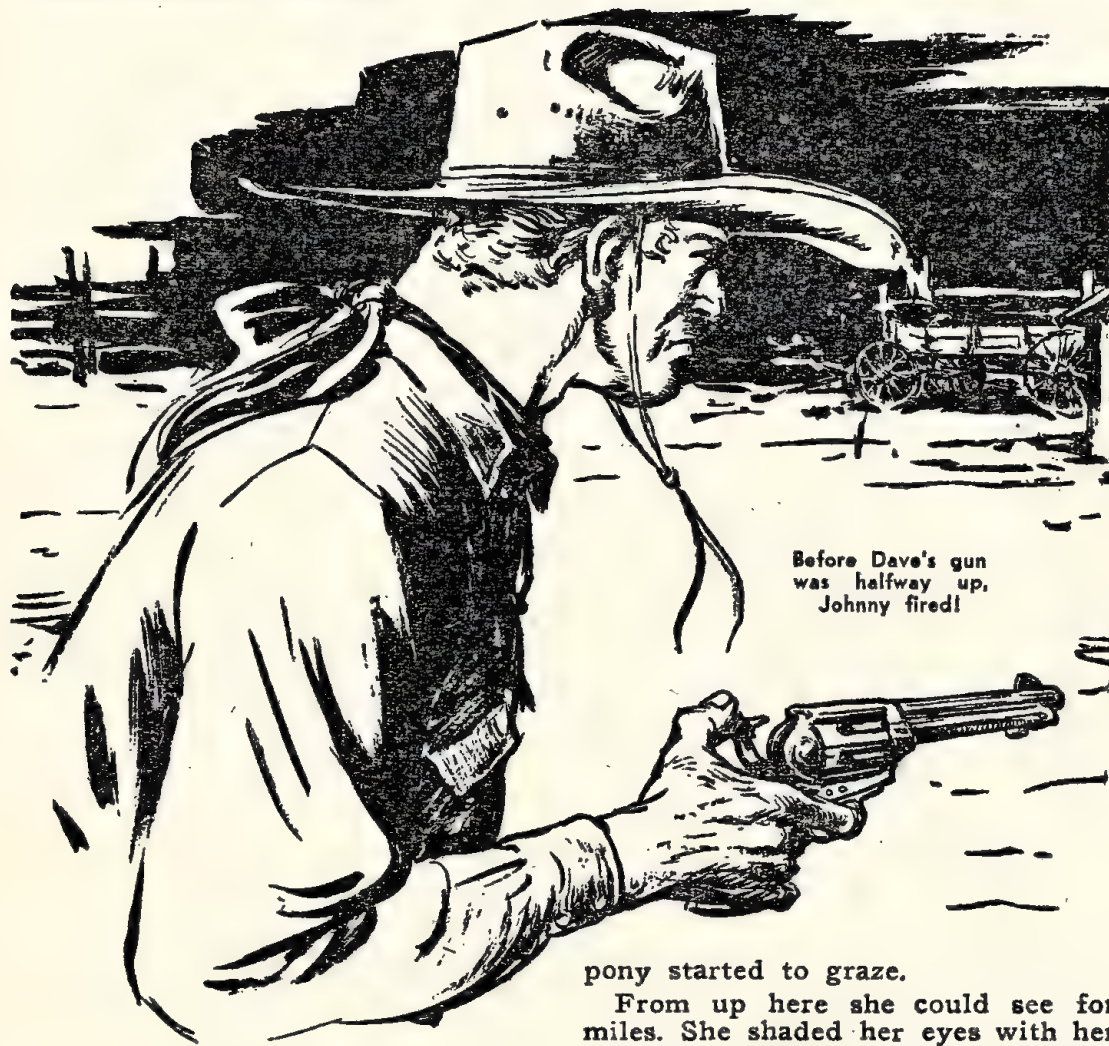
pony started to graze.

From up here she could see for miles. She shaded her eyes with her hand and looked out over the rolling prairie. Heat waves danced and made the air shimmer before her eyes. Far to the left was the thin line of green where trees grew along the banks of Clear River. Beyond that a straight line of smoke rose straight into the air.

That would be Harry Gould's big house, she thought abstractly. Clear River separated her own Lazy K ranch from Gould's big Bar Diamond spread. The Lazy K buildings were not far from the river, in a protect-

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HOME, HARDCASE!

BY W. P. BROTHERS • • PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR



Anything could happen when the girl-boss of the Lazy K brought an owlhooter home as an honored guest . . .

ed hollow now out of sight.

She stood at the edge of the rim-rock and a faint breeze caressed her hair. She wore faded blue denims and an old shirt that could not conceal the roundness of her figure. Her waist was slim and she stood straight in her high-heeled riding boots. Her face was healthy and tanned and her

lips were soft over her white teeth.

She knew why she'd come here. The loneliness was almost more than she could bear. It was up here that she and Dave often came, it was here that she'd bade him goodbye more than a year ago. She came here often, for somehow here on top of the world, where you could see ev-

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everything, she felt closer to him. When she was up here, Dave didn't seem so far away, and the time when he would return didn't seem so hopelessly far off.

"Oh, Dave, Dave—" she said half aloud, "why did you have to go?" A tear moistened her eye and started down her cheek. "Dave, Dave," she said, "come back to me. Come back, Dave. I miss you so."

She remembered his black hair and black eyes and his infectious Irish smile. "There's gold in the Wild Horse Mountains," Dave had said that day so long ago. "They've uncovered a big vein. Give me two years, Sally, honey. Wait for me and I'll come back rich. Give me two years."

"No," Sally had said, although she knew it was useless to argue with a man like Dave Shanahan. "No, Dave, don't go. We've enough here. We can be married and—"

"There's gold in the Wild Horse Mountains," Dave had repeated slowly.

And Sally O'Harra had known there was nothing to be done. She couldn't hold Dave back when he wanted to go. She didn't want him to settle down until he was ready, until he'd searched for gold in his Wild Horse Mountains. She could have insisted that they get married then and there. Dave loved her and would have done what she wanted.

But she didn't want to share a lifetime of Dave's love with a ghost, with the ghost of a dream of gold. She didn't want Dave to come to resent a marriage that tied him down too soon. For Sally O'Harra knew that in all men there were Wild Horse Mountains that had to be searched over for gold before a man could be at peace with himself.

"Give me two years," Dave had said. "Maybe I'll come back in less. But in two years I'll know. You'll wait for me, Sally, honey—?"

SALLY HAD nodded numbly, feeling the cold tightness of fear in her heart. She would wait for two years, for five years, forever if necessary. But what if Dave

shouldn't come back? What if he should be killed? The Wild Horse Mountains were rugged and there were outlaws in them and they were far away. Her heart told her she couldn't let herself risk losing Dave.

"Two years—maybe less, Sally, honey," Dave had said.

"Sally, honey—!" It was Dave's expression, and when she thought of it, she thought of his arms around her and his face close to hers and the sinewy leanness of his body.

"Two years—!" It was a long time to wait for someone to come back, especially someone she loved as much as she did Dave. Two years seems like an eternity when you're twenty years old and in love.

She had watched him from the rim-rock here. He'd ridden away, tall and straight in his saddle. The big bay had carried him easily, taking him away from her in long strides. She had stood there, rooted to the spot, watching him go, unable to do anything. On the first rise of ground he had turned and waved. She had waved back. Then he had ridden on.

She remembered the sharp sting of tears that she had held back so long, that had welled up from her heart. She watched until he was only a speck in the distance, and even longer, imagining she could still see him. It was dark before she had mounted her horse and had started back for the ranch.

Now, as the late afternoon sun slanted over her, she followed again with her eyes the direction he had taken. She felt again the sharp poignancy of their parting over a year ago.

"Two years—maybe less, Sally, honey."

"Oh, Dave, come back to me," she whispered fervently. "Come back. Come—"

Her thoughts were interrupted by a thin crack of sound in the hot air. Had the sage-land not been so quiet or had she not been so high up, she would not have heard it.

Her eyes searched the surrounding countryside. It had sounded like the far-off crack of a six-gun. She thought at first it might have been

a puncher shooting at a stray ground-hog.

When she could see nothing, she half decided her imagination had been playing tricks on her. Then she heard the faint crack again.

Almost immediately she saw them when she looked again. It was a horse and rider and they were far off, barely discernable in the distance. They were moving very slowly, and Sally became puzzled. There seemed to be no reason for the shooting unless horse and rider were in trouble.

For a few minutes longer she watched, and although she couldn't be sure, it seemed to her that whoever the rider was, he was not sitting straight in his saddle. He seemed to be slumped over the saddle horn. Presently she heard the faint crack of his gun again.

She went to the pinto, who had grazed away. Taking the reins, she mounted. In another minute horse and girl were sliding down the slope from the rim-rock. When they reached the bottom, Sally pointed her pony in the direction of the far-off rider and touched her spurs to the pinto's flanks.

IT WAS MORE than an hour later that she found them. Horse and rider were in a small arroyo. The horse was nuzzling at the base of some green brush where not long ago water had stood.

The rider sat slumped over the horn of his saddle, his Stetson pulled low over his face, an empty six-gun still dangling from his fingers. Both horse and rider were caked with sweat and alkali dust. Animal and man seemed infinitely weary.

At Sally's approach, the horse raised its head and looked at them. The man in the saddle did not move. She dismounted and went close. The man's horse, a big roan, shied away from her and the rider nearly fell off. She could see a caked mat of dust and blood covering his shirt front. There was dried blood on his saddle and one trouser leg had been torn away and revealed a rough bandage.

Acting quickly, Sally reached up to pull the man from the saddle. As her hand touched his arm, the man winced and drew away and raised his head.

"Can you dismount?" Sally asked.

The man looked at her with bleary eyes. There was a ten-day growth of blond beard covering his chalky face.

She thought he had not heard and she was about to speak again when the man on the horse said through caked lips, "Ma-am, if ever I get off, I won't be able to get on again."

"Here. Give me your arm."

"Not that—other arm—shot up that side—" It was with a tremendous effort that he spoke.

She went around the horse. Taking his other arm, she helped him slide from the saddle. He seemed to have no strength left in him, she thought, as he leaned heavily against her. He would have fallen had she not held him. She could hear the short gasps of his breath as she half carried, half dragged him into the shade of a mesquite bush.

She noticed with a curious sensation as she laid him down that he still clutched his gun in his good hand. Taking off his hat, she noticed that there was the mark of a bullet crease along his left temple. She poked his hat under his head and made him as comfortable as possible before she went after the canteen on the saddle of her pinto.

He was only half conscious. She managed to make him drink a little water. Then she poured some in her own sombrero and gave the big roan a drink. After that she turned her attention back to the wounded man.

He was younger than she thought at first. Under the matted beard, his face had a youthful, almost boyish appearance. He had a good nose and a strong chin. As if from habit, his lips were pressed tightly against his teeth. But what surprised Sally most was his hair. It was golden and wavy and a shaft of sunlight through the mesquite bush glinted firey from it. He needed a haircut badly. The hair was silky and thick above his ears and on the back of his neck.

She tore away his shirt, and with water from the canteen, cleaned the wounds in his chest. There were two high on the shoulder and a dangerous one lower down on his ribs. There was a deep flesh wound above his left knee and a bullet was embedded in the middle of his thigh.

She wondered with a shudder how long the man had ridden shot up like that.

AFTER SHE had cleaned the wounds, she found an old shirt in one of his saddle bags and bound them tightly. They were bad wounds, all of them, and she wondered how long the man could live.

"I'll live with another drink of water," he said.

She felt a flush creep over her face as she realized he'd guessed what she was thinking. His eyes were open and they were as blue as the sky on a spring day. They looked straight into her own, and she felt an excitement mounting inside her. She reached for the canteen and held it to his lips.

After he'd taken two swallows, she took it away.

"How long have you been traveling like this?" she asked him presently.

"I don't know. I sort of lost track of time, I reckon," he said calmly. He spoke with a western drawl, but there was a foreign quality about it. It was almost like the speech she'd once heard a professor from an eastern college use when he passed through.

"I'm obliged to you for hearing my shots," he went on, "and coming to investigate. I don't remember when I started shooting. It seems like days ago."

"It's wild country hereabouts," Sally said quietly. "I just happened to hear you. Where are you from?"

The man's mouth twisted into a smile. "From lots of places. So many I can't remember them all."

She flushed hotly. "I was just wondering whom to notify," she said indignantly, "but if you don't want to tell me your name or where you're from—"

A weak laugh broke her off. "You didn't ask my name," he said. "And it's true—I'm from nowhere. I used to have a family, but I don't think they'd be happy to hear from me. Just call me John English and say I'm from Texas."

"We're in Texas now," Sally said acidly.

His voice suddenly became softer. "Don't worry, ma'am. I'm a hard one to kill. You won't have to worry about notifying anyone."

The girl flushed again. She got up and went over to the pinto and loosened the animal's girth. When she came back, the man's eyes were closed and he appeared to be sleeping.

For a long time she watched him. What a different kind of man he was from Dave Shanahan, she thought. She checked herself abruptly, for in her own mind she was beginning to compare them.

The sun was dipping steeply in the west when she put a hand on the shoulder of the man who called himself John English. Immediately the blue eyes came open.

"Do you think you're able to travel?" Sally asked. "The ranch is a good ride from here. We'll want to get there before dark."

John English nodded and tried to get up. The grimace on his face told her of the terrible pain. She felt a surge of pity rush through her as she helped him by his good arm.

He could barely stand. His face was drained of color and he leaned heavily on her. She knew he wouldn't be able to stay on a horse.

"We'll both ride the pinto," Sally announced briefly. "I can hold you on and we'll lead your horse."

He nodded and together they made the few steps to the fresher horse. It was all she could do to get him into the saddle, for he was a big man. He held on tightly while she gathered the reins of the roan and then mounted the pinto behind him. Together they started for the Lazy K ranch house, her own arms under his, supporting him in the saddle in front of her.

It was a long ride and it was near-

ly dark before the lights of the Lazy K blinked out their greeting to her. The blond man she held alternated between unconsciousness and semi-consciousness. She felt the slow beating of his heart beneath her arms as they rode, and his labored breathing gave her anxious reassurance. A protective tenderness crept over her. It suddenly seemed to her the most important thing in the world that she get this stranger safely to the Lazy K. She wondered at the feeling inside her, for it was something she had never known before. She thought of the black-eyed Dave Shanahan and then of this man in the saddle in front of her, and she was troubled by something she knew not what.

AS SHE rode up the yard past the bunkhouse, she called sharply, "Charlie, Mike, Bill!"

Three hired hands tumbled out and their faces gaped in astonishment at what they saw.

"Give a hand here! He's hurt—badly!"

She pulled the horse up in front of the gate, and the three men carefully lifted John English from the saddle. In an instant, Sally was down herself, her arms aching and tired from the long strain. "Take him into the side bedroom," she ordered. Then to Maria, the big Mexican cook who had rushed to the porch: "Heat plenty of hot water and fix some broth."

Maria nodded quickly, but before she went back into the house, she whispered, "Meester Gould. He has been waiting to see you. He ees inside—now." Then she hurried back to her kitchen.

Sally knew what Harry Gould would want, but she was too concerned with the wounded man to care very much. She could tell Harry Gould any time that she wouldn't sell the Lazy K—after they had done what they could for the blond John English.

With Bill's help, Sally got him undressed and into bed. They undid the bandages and washed the wounds with hot soap and water and put on

fresh, clean bandages. Then Maria brought in a bowl of broth, and John English was able to eat a little before he lapsed into sleep.

When Sally handed Bill the bowl, she was surprised to see Harry Gould standing at the foot of the bed looking curiously at the wounded man. Harry Gould was a cumbersome man in his mid-forties with a sizeable paunch and heavy jowls. "Where did you find him?" Gould asked, his eyes narrowing.

"A few miles south of Mesa Rock," Sally answered simply. "He was about done for. It was all he could do to fire his gun to attract attention."

"You should have left him there," Gould said cynically.

"Left him there—?" Sally was aghast.

"He looks like a gunman. He's probably wanted by half a dozen sheriffs. Look at those hands—not a callous on them. Meaning he sure don't work for a living. And my guess is he got those gun wounds running from a posse."

"Mebbe you're right," old Bill Sanders said slowly, "but that ain't no reason to leave him die on the prairie."

"He's a human being—" Sally started fiercely.

Harry Gould's lips flicked into a faint smile. He was no man's fool, Harry Gould, and he began to guess things about Sally O'Harra's feelings that Sally herself didn't realize. "Did you ever think that maybe you're saving him for a hangman's noose?" he asked quietly.

The muscles in Sally's face froze. She was thankful when old Bill Sanders put a comforting hand on her arm and said to Gould: "We don't know who he is, Mister Gould. And until we know he's on the owl-hoot trail, why I reckon we'll just take care of him like anybody else."

"Well, he may not last long enough to give you worry."

Sally looked over at the wounded man. What Harry Gould said might very likely be true. For a long moment she hoped and prayed fer-

vently to herself that John English might live.

They all went back to the living room of the ranch house. Maria brought in lighted lamps. Sally invited Harry Gould to stay for supper, although she would have preferred to eat alone. She wanted time to think of the jumbled emotions that were racing through her.

AFTER SUPPER, after Maria had cleared away and Harry Gould had lit his cigar, Sally waited for the purpose of Gould's visit. But she was unprepared for what the man said.

"I've been wanting to buy this spread for many years now," Gould said. "Since long before your maw and paw died, Sally."

"Harry, you know I'd never sell the Lazy K," she said earnestly. "Why, Dad settled here with Mother before I was born. This is my home."

"Running a cattle ranch is no woman's job. It's a job for a man—and it takes a good man to make a ranch pay these days. Now, I know you're losing money here. Ain't none of my business how long you can hold out, but my guess is it won't be for long."

"It's true," she admitted sadly. "The Lazy K has lost money. But there's been so much rustling—Since Dad died, I've lost more than five hundred head. But," she added vehemently, "I'll hold on! I'll hold on till Dave gets back! Dave'll stop the rustling that's been going on!"

"Maybe Dave won't be coming back," Gould said quietly.

"How do you know?" Sally said in alarm. "What makes you say that—?" A note of fright crept into her voice.

"Now look here, Sally," Gould said. "I've got a proposition to make. It may sound funny at first, but I'm dead serious about it. And I wish you wouldn't laugh till you've heard me through. I know this is your home and you love it. I know you don't want to leave it. I can understand that. So why don't we merge places. We'd have one of the biggest ranches in the whole of Texas." A

hard light grew in Gould's eyes. "We'd be running the State."

"You mean—you mean—marriage?" Sally asked incredulously.

"Now don't laugh, Sally," Gould said with a blush. "I know I'm not much to look at. But I know how to treat a woman, and my house is too big for one man. I love you, Sally—I guess I've always loved you. I ain't too old for you, Sally. And when I passed on, you'd have the whole shebang, the whole works. We'd be the biggest in the State, and I'd give you anything you wanted—clothes, trips east, servants. Why maybe we'd even go to Europe—"

Sally was shaking her head numbly. "I can't, Harry. You know the ranch is really half Dave's. He worked on it since he was orphaned, and Dad wanted it to go to both of us."

"Maybe Dave ain't comin' back," Gould said. "The Wild Mountains is rough and he mighta gotten killed. If he'd found a strike or if he hadn't found a strike, he'd 'a been back 'fore this—especially with a girl like you waiting for him."

Sally was crying. The tears flowed from her eyes in spite of all her efforts to stop them. "No, don't say that," she cried with anguish. "He'll come back! Dave'll come back to me! He's got to come back!"

Harry Gould got up from his chair. "Don't say yes or no now, Sally. Just think it over for as long a time as you want. It'd be a way to save the Lazy K, and you'd make me a mighty happy man. I could give you lots of things, Sally. Just think it over carefully."

Taking his hat from the mantle, Harry Gould walked to the door with his heavy, shambling tread. "I won't say anything to the sheriff about the outlaw you got in there—until you decide. But he'd ought to be turned over to the law. I'll wait until you decide, Sally—"

Then he was gone, and Sally collapsed into a chair. Her whole lithe body trembled with sobs. She knew Harry Gould's proposition was generous—and it would be so easy to accept. Together, Mister and Mrs.

Gould—they'd be the biggest outfit in Texas. As Mrs. Gould she would be known far and wide. There would be nothing she could not have—nothing except love.

It would be so easy to say, "Yes," to Harry Gould, even if she did not love him. It would be so easy—

"Dave, oh, Dave where are you?" she cried out half to herself. "Come back to me, Dave—"

CHAPTER II

CAREFULLY, Sally tore open the note that Harry Gould's rider had brought. She hadn't seen the man since that night two weeks ago, the night she'd brought John English in on the pinto. She'd been too busy with other things to see Harry Gould.

For the first six days, English had hovered between life and death. The wound in his chest had affected his breathing, and everyone at the ranch expected him to die.

But he was tough. The man was hard as nails. Sally figured he must have ridden for nearly a week before she had found him on the prairie. He clung to life tenaciously, like a strong man refusing to let go of something.

And he had lived. He had grimly held on. On the seventh day, Sally had gone to the room and his eyes were open and there was a different look on his face, as if he'd won a battle. After that his recovery had been slow but steady. Three days ago he had asked for water and soap and a razor. But he'd been too weak to shave himself. Old Bill Sanders had come in and done the job for him.

When Sally had seen him it was as if she were looking at John English for the first time. He had a smooth, clear complexion and a pleasant smile that the beard had hidden. There were humorous lines at the corners of his mouth that she had never seen before. Nor had she noticed the malicious twinkle of his blue eyes. Her heart had skipped a beat and she'd gone from the room.

"I am hoping your bandit is well enough to be left alone," Harry

Gould had written, "*for I'm having a party on Saturday night. I'm counting on you and the rest of the Lazy K being there. I particularly hope you won't disappoint me. Sincerest regards, Harry Gould.*"

She read the note over twice. She bit her lip thoughtfully and wondered what to do. Gould would be expecting an answer to his proposition, and she didn't know what answer she could give him.

There had been evidence of more rustling of Lazy K stock. The hands had gone out and followed the trail, but they'd lost it and had to come back. It was the biggest loss yet—the tracks had indicated there were close to a hundred head that had been stolen. If there was only some way to put a stop to the rustling—

Her thoughts were interrupted by a clatter from the sickroom. She shoved Harry Gould's note into a pocket of her Levis and went in the direction of the noise.

John English sat up in bed, a smile covering his face. In one hand he held a basin, in the other a spoon. The clatter had been deliberate to attract attention.

"The patient seems better this morning," Sally said coldly.

"The patient craves the society of others this morning," English said, matching her severity mockingly. His eyes were bright blue and danced merrily. His long blond hair was carefully combed back, and there was a malicious smile about his lips.

"You are about to see a before and after," he said. "The 'before' is now. The 'after' will be when Bill Sanders thinks he's chopped off enough of my hair."

Sally forgot her annoyance. "You're not going to have him cut it all off," she said anxiously. She reached out instinctively.

He caught her arm and pulled her to him and his other arm crept around her. Before she realized what had happened their lips touched. She tried to pull away but there was no strength left in her arms. She could not stop them from creeping around his neck. And then there was a delicious sensation that coursed through

her like a madness. It was an intoxicating agony that was sweeter than wild honey and seemed to melt everything within her. For a tremendous moment they clung together, trembling.

And then suddenly she thought of Dave and she was able to push away from the man. She burned with shame for what she had done, but at the same time she knew she couldn't have helped it. And then there was no shame, only a hungry longing for Dave to be back.

THEY LOOKED at each other for a long moment, then John English said: "I'm sorry. I had no right to do that. But you were so pretty standing there—"

"You didn't call me in here to tell me about your haircut," Sally accused him.

"No," he said, "I didn't. I wanted to talk to you because I hear you've been losing cattle."

"Who've you been talking to?" she asked shortly.

"News of rustling travels fast."

"Old Bill Sanders."

"Partly right. But I can hear most things that are said on the porch or in the yard outside. Especially when the breeze is right."

"Why should you be interested. You've no stake in the Lazy K—"

"I owe you my life. That's enough reason to want to help, isn't it? Is there anyone on the ranch you suspect?"

"No. I've known our punchers for years. They couldn't—"

"Anyone in the neighborhood who'd like to see you off the Lazy K?"

"Harry Gould has wanted to buy me out for a long time. But he has the big Bar Diamond spread. He wouldn't—" Immediately she thought of Gould's words: *We'd have one of the biggest ranches in the whole of Texas. We'd be running the State.*

A little shudder passed through Sally, and English guessed her thoughts. She said: "What in the world makes you think these rustlers aren't from the outside?"

"I know how these things work,"

John English said, and his eyes suddenly became hard as blue diamonds. "This stealing is too regular—like clockwork—too well organized. If it's an outside bunch, they've got a man around here who's been tipping them off. Either that—or it's a local affair."

"Harry Gould has been losing cattle, too."

"But he hasn't been doing a lot to catch the thieves, has he? Maybe he sends a few boys out now and then to make it look good. He'd do that—"

"How do you know these things?" Sally asked suddenly.

English's eyes faltered for a second. "Just guesswork," he said. "Nothing else to do while I lie in bed."

"You're not telling the truth. It's like Gould said. You are an outlaw. You got those wounds from posse bullets."

He smiled thinly. "Gould guessed that? I'm surprised he hasn't notified the law."

"I don't think he will—for a while—until Saturday, at least."

THE MAN on the bed looked at her quizzically, and Sally was thankful he didn't ask her to explain. Something inside her made her ashamed of Harry Gould's proposal of marriage. Above all things she wanted to keep it from this blond man with the bright blue eyes.

"Why haven't you gone to the Sheriff?" English asked then.

"Why—? Why—I—I don't know you're an outlaw. There would be no reason—"

"You probably guessed—or didn't you want to? Old Bill Sanders knew right away. I could tell by the look on his face. He's been hinting about gun-fighters, wondering out loud how fast they draw, wanting me to talk."

"I guess maybe I realized what you were, but didn't want to admit it—even to myself," Sally confessed frankly.

"Why were you concerned?" he asked slowly, his voice husky with emotion.

Sally became flustered before his

level stare. It was a question that she had dared not ask herself even. She started, "Why—" and then Old Bill Sanders came into the room with a pair of scissors in one hand and a cloth and mirror in the other.

She was thankful for the interruption, for she was afraid of her feelings.

"Ready t'have yore wool shorn, youngster?" Old Bill asked brightly.

Sally turned to go, and English said, "Don't worry about things, Miss O'Harra. Soon as I'm up and around, I'll have a look into that cattle rustlin'."

"Dadgumit, Johnny," Old Bill Saunders said with a cackle, "I'm glad to hear you talking like that. This ranch needs a man—" He glanced apologetically at Sally. "—to stop the rustlin' goin' on. Now, if I were a mite younger—"

Sally hurried from the room before they could read the emotion in her face. Running the Lazy K had been a strain and she found herself welcoming help from someone she could trust.

But then she asked herself if she could trust John English. After all, he was an outlaw, a renegade, undoubtedly wanted by the law. And the rustling had increased since he'd come. Why, even he had said that rustlers needed someone on the inside. There may even be a gang around waiting to do his bidding. A renegade like John English would not let sympathy or gratitude stand in the way of what he wanted.

There were other thoughts surging inside her, too, thoughts that she strove to push back and keep from thinking, for they frightened her. She tried not to heed them, but little soundless voices inside her told her that she was in love with John English and he with her.

After giving instructions to Maria in the kitchen, Sally went out to the corral and roped her pinto. One of the hands offered to saddle it for her, but she shook her head; she'd been raised on the Lazy K and could saddle a horse as quick as any man.

Any man that is, except Dave

Shanahan. Dave had been thirteen when his mother and father had been killed and he'd come to live with the O'Harra. Sally's father had brought Dave up as his own son, for he'd known and respected Mike Shanahan for many years.

From that first day, that hot day in July when she'd seen Dave standing awkward and uncertain by the buckboard when her father had brought him home, Sally had been in love with Dave. He could always do everything better than anyone else. He taught her how to ride and rope and cook a meal without water and whistle with her fingers. He made her little boats from the willows that grew along Clear River and told her crazy stories that he made up and that made her giggle uncontrollably.

Always there had been that secret understanding between them: that when they grew up, when they were man and woman rather than boy and girl, they would be married. Sally had wanted that more than anything else in the world.

As she rode out, heading across the prairie, Sally knew that was still what she wanted more than anything. Her love for Dave was more than just an understanding; it was a thrill that jumped inside her whenever he was around.

IT WAS strangely different from the delicious turbulence that John English stirred in her, yet there was the same quality in it. John English, with his handsome, laughing face, his blue eyes and blond hair, his careless, devil-may-care attitude—she loved these things, too. For the first time since she had discovered the wounded man, Sally admitted to herself that she loved him.

It was a terrible choice that she had to make. If Dave didn't come back, there would be no choice—but she wanted Dave back, wanted him desperately. Or, she thought with sudden coldness, there was Harry Gould. Maybe that could be her answer; maybe that would be the only course she could take.

Sally had intended to ride to the

place where the hired hands had lost the trail of the stolen cattle two days ago. But she was interrupted when she saw two riders approaching on her left. They waved to her, so she wheeled her horse to meet them.

She was still a considerable distance from them when she recognized Sheriff Art Bailey and his deputy, Hank Calhoun. Quick darts of apprehension raced through her mind. She thought of the wounded John English, still confined to his bed, and she wondered if it was as Harry Gould had said, that she might have saved him for a hangman's noose. She bristled at the thought and determined that John English had a fighting chance coming to him.

When they drew close, Sally thought she recognized a sly look on Sheriff Bailey's face. She wondered what it meant.

"Hi there, Miss Sally," Bailey roared goodnaturedly. "Haven't seen you in town in a long time."

"I've been busy, sheriff," Sally said. "Forty miles is a long way to ride."

"Heard you been having some rustling. One of Harry Gould's men come in the other day and reported it."

She gave them a detailed account of her losses. "My punchers lost the trail somewhere south of here," she said. "I figured you'd be having the railroads watched, and the Rangers at the border were notified when we lost the other batch."

Sheriff Bailey spat in the dust and shook his head. "Beats me. There's plenty of space here for a man to hide a good-sized herd of rustled steers, but my theory is that sooner or later he'll have to make a drive or ship them. That's when we'll get 'em. Areas too big to comb, and there ain't been no trails left that the cattle took. So we're waiting—"

"And I'm losing cattle," Sally said grimly, "while you're waiting."

"Now look here, Miss Sally," Bailey said doggedly, "I got only one deputy. I'm doin' the best I can—"

"You didn't ride forty miles over

here to investigate cattle stealing," Sally said coldly.

"No, matter of fact, we didn't. We got word that London Johnny might be in this neighborhood."

"London Johnny?" Sally asked quickly.

Hank Calhoun, the deputy, who had been silent up till now, spoke. "He's a gunman, Miss O'Harra. There's a reward for him. Word has it he's been shot up pretty bad, and they figure he might have headed up this way."

THE SHERIFF looked quickly at his deputy as if to warn the man he were talking too much. "We'll be around a few days," he said. "If you see anyone, I'd be obliged if you'd let us know."

"He's tall and good lookin' and blond," the deputy cut in, "and he talks with a funny drawl."

Sally nodded her head. She must warn him, she thought. So John English was known as London Johnny. Well, it fit well enough. She said to the sheriff: "While you're up here, you might keep an eye open for my Lazy K steers. There's no reward, but that's what you're paid for."

The sheriff flushed crimson and shifted in his saddle. "Now, doggonit, Miss Sally, don't be telling me how to do my sheriffin'." Then his manner changed. "I dang near forgot it." The sly look returned to his face. "Got a letter here for you. The stagecoach left it at Dry Springs and a waddy brought it up and gave it t'me. 'Pears like we're about big enough to have a postoffice in Logansburg, being a county seat and all that."

He fumbled in his shirt pocket for the letter, a gray tattered envelope that had been passed from many hands. Sally wheeled her horse close and took it. The handwriting on the envelope was Dave's!

"We'll be goin'," Sheriff Bailey drawled. "We'll stop in at the Lazy K tomorrow or the next day." He swung his horse around and started to move off.

Before the deputy followed, he called to Sally: "If you see that

hombre London Johnny, you'll let us know? There's a reward—" She missed the last of his words.

She held the letter in a trembling hand and watched the two law officers ride away. Then she started the pinto back toward the Lazy K. She held Dave's letter a long time before she dared open it. When she did, her fingers shook and her heart beat a rapid little tattoo inside her.

She looked at the familiar scrawl on the page and her eyes blurred. For a minute she could not read it. Finally, when she could make it out, she found words that sent her spirits soaring.

Dave was coming home! He hadn't found any gold in the Wild Horse Mountains, but he was coming home! He missed her very much and didn't know when he'd get to the Lazy K, but it would be within about six weeks! She looked quickly at the date at the top of the letter. It had been written nearly three weeks ago! She felt a choking sensation grip her throat. *Dave was coming home!*

CHAPTER III

WHEN SHE got back to the ranch she went directly to the bedroom where Johnny English lay. In a few brief words she told him about her meeting with the sheriff and his deputy.

For a split second, the wounded man's eyes hardened. Then he laughed, a gay, carefree, ringing laugh that perplexed Sally.

"I'll take care of the sheriff when the time comes," he said.

She looked into the bright blue of his eyes and a confused jumble of emotions danced within her. She thought of the letter from Dave in her pocket, and though she knew she should, she couldn't tell Johnny English that Dave was coming home.

"He'll ask a few more questions around, and he'll know you're here," Sally said quietly. "Both he and the deputy are after the reward money."

"Are you afraid they'll get me?" Johnny asked slowly.

"Of course I'm afraid. Why do you think I'm warning you—"

"You'd try to protect a thief and a killer?" he said with a faint smile.

"I don't know, Johnny—I'm so mixed up inside—"

"Come here," he said gently. "Come here to me."

She went and he took her in his arms and covered her face with kisses. "You love me," he murmured, "and I love you. That's all I wanted to know. We can go somewhere—out to California, maybe, or up into Oregon. I'll never carry a gun again. We'll have a ranch—"

"No, no!" she cried. "No, Johnny! I can't—"

"Do you love me?"

"Yes, but there's the ranch, and—"

"We'll find another ranch, far away from here."

Sally realized dimly that he did not know about Dave Shanahan. She had never mentioned it, and she guessed that neither had Old Bill Sanders who brought Johnny most of his information.

"Oh, Johnny," she cried fiercely, "why didn't I let you die in the desert? Why didn't I ignore your shots. Oh, why did you have to come here and make me love you—"

"From that first day when I was half dead out there, I knew you were the one," he said. "As soon as I saw you standing by the horse, I wanted to live—I had to live, I fought to live." His voice was tense with emotion.

"No, don't say it, Johnny. This isn't right. This can't happen—" She felt his strong lean arms around her and she saw the pulse throbbing in his throat. "We can't—it isn't right—"

"Of course it's right," he said. "Everything will be all right."

"No! No, everything isn't all right." With an effort she tore herself away from his arms. She stood there gasping for breath, feeling the hot tears rushing down her face. "Oh, I do love you, Johnny, but—but—" Blindly she hurried from the room, reaching for something to dry her tears.

She went to her own room at the other end of the ranch house, grateful that Maria was busy in the kitch-

en and not around to see her. She sat on her bed and a great despair filled her heart. What am I to do, she asked herself over and over again. What am I to do?

FOR THE next two days she avoided being alone with Johnny English. The sheriff had not come by, and she guessed that Harry Gould may have had something to do with that. He was waiting for her answer, and to him, Johnny English was another pawn in the game. He had guessed even before Sally herself knew it, that she was in love with English. Harry Gould, she knew, would hold off the sheriff until Saturday, at least—until the party when Sally would have to give him her decision.

And on Saturday morning, Sally made preparations for the party with dread. Everyone for miles around would be invited. The Bar Diamond was a big spread. There would be barbecues and horse races and horse-shoe pitching. In the evening there would be dancing on the porch and in the living room of big hacienda. Living so far from Logansburg most of the folks in the neighborhood didn't get to town often. They would welcome the social activity of a party at the Bar Diamond.

She made her preparations but her mind was not on what she was doing. It was arranged that Old Bill Sanders would take her party things to the Bar Diamond in the buckboard. She would follow on her horse later and change her clothes there.

After she had packed everything she thought was necessary, and Sanders had started off for the Bar Diamond, she mounted her pinto and rode off across the prairie. It was out here, out in the wide open spaces, with the scent of sage in the air and a breeze cooling her face, that she could think, that she could find a solution to her problem. She didn't know what answer she would give to Harry Gould. She was grimly determined not to lose the Lazy K. Her father and mother had fought here and worked here and finally had died here. No, she wouldn't see it

lost. *She'd marry Harry Gould first!*

It seemed like an easy solution. It would take care of everything. Harry Gould could stall the sheriff and arrange for Johnny to get away if she asked it. She knew it wasn't the right thing to do, but she loved Johnny. She couldn't bear to think of him going to prison or being hanged, no matter what he'd done.

Then there was the rustling. Johnny couldn't help her on that. He wanted to, and he might have been able to have done something had he arrived sooner. But as it was, he wasn't even able to move from bed, much less ride.

And even if Dave could stop the rustling when he came back, she didn't know whether or not they could keep the Lazy K going. They'd suffered too heavily from cattle thieves already.

Poor Dave, she thought with sadness. He loved the Lazy K as much as I. But it would be the best compensation she could give him for losing it. He could have her half of the money Harry Gould would pay. That would be better than his losing everything. He would have enough to start over some place else. In time he'd get over the hurt and find another girl.

She knew what answer she had to give Harry Gould. It was not an easy answer, but it was the only thing that would save the two men she loved.

She wheeled her horse around and started for the Bar Diamond spread. She wondered if she had included everything necessary in her suitcase. Had she included her hair-brushes? She couldn't remember. She'd packed hastily and her mind had been on other things.

Then, because she honestly couldn't remember and because she wanted to delay her arrival at the Bar Diamond party as much as she could, she decided to go back to the Lazy K ranch house. She'd come a long way and it took her nearly an hour, for she let the horse choose its own gait.

DRIPPING the reins over the hitching rack outside the

porch, she went inside. The house was ominously quiet. She went to her bedroom and found she *had* forgotten to include her hairbrushes. She picked them up and then wondered if Johnny was in need of anything. No one disturbed him in the mornings, so he generally slept late. She went to the door of his room and tapped lightly.

There was no answer. She turned the knob gently and opened the door. Astonishment cut through her like a knife.

The bed was empty! There was no one in the room! Johnny English was gone! Her first wild thought was that the sheriff had come and taken him, forced him to ride in his condition. She ran through the house and out to the porch.

"Charlie!" she called. "Charlie!" Charlie had been behind to look after the stock.

Presently Charlie emerged from the blacksmith shed near the barn. She hurried toward him.

"Did they take Johnny—I mean Mr. English?" she asked breathlessly. "Did the sheriff—?"

Charlie was a lanky puncher in his late thirties. "Nope," he said. "Nobody been here since you all left."

"But Mr. English—he's gone."

"Gone?" Charlie looked dumbfounded. "Why, I been working in the smithy for better 'n hour. I'd 'a heard anyone coming. Nobody took him away."

Then Sally began to comprehend. Johnny English had recovered from his wounds and had gone. He had misled them all about his progress toward recovery. While Charlie was at the smithy, he'd been able to sneak away without being seen.

She was hurt and bewildered by what had happened. He could have said goodbye. Was he afraid of the sheriff? It seemed unlikely from his attitude. Or was it because of her that he had gone so suddenly? Why had he pretended to be bed-ridden when he wasn't?

Any way she tried to figure it, it made no sense. There was an emptiness in her heart, a stunned disappointment she could not hide. She

went to the lower pasture where they had kept Johnny's big roan. It, too, was gone. His saddle and bridle were gone from the pegs in the bunk house where they'd been hung.

Everything was clear. There was nothing to be done. He was gone and she knew she had best try to forget him. At the hitching rack she mounted her horse. She touched light spurs to his flanks, and horse and rider went thundering out of the yard in the direction of the Bar Diamond.

By the time she reached Harry Gould's place, the party was in full swing. It was late in the afternoon. Improvised benches and tables cluttered the yard and were testimony that many people had eaten heartily. Children were playing games on one side and men stood in groups talking. The women were clustered around a few tables exchanging bits of information and snatches of gossip, showing off a new baby or explaining a new recipe.

Harry Gould had seldom left his place on the big porch all afternoon. He had been watching the distance, waiting for Sally to come. When he saw her horse trotting up, he broke away from the group of men gathered around him and came down to help her dismount.

"I was worried," Gould said suavely as he took her hand. "They told me you'd left at the same time as the others. I was about ready to organize a search—"

"I'd forgotten something," Sally confessed weakly, trying not to let Gould read the concern that was in her face. "I had to go back—and I got held up."

"Bill Sanders brought your things. I've had them put in a separate room. I'll show you where they are. I expect you'll want to change."

She nodded and Harry Gould led the way into the house. It was a big place, the Bar Diamond ranch house. The big living room, cleared of all furniture now, was like a gigantic cavern with a tremendous fireplace at the end. The floors were polished stone on the ground floor. Solid oaken beams held the ceiling and the

woodwork was the golden brown of hand-rubbed hardwood.

IT WILL soon be mine, Sally thought wearily. She looked at the stocky, waddling figure in front of her and the price seemed too high to pay. But she had to give Johnny a chance to escape, and she had to give to Dave what was rightfully his.

They mounted the stairs and Gould led her down a large hall with rooms flanking either side. Finally he opened a door, and as she started to enter, he caught her shoulders. His head bent forward to kiss her. She drew away in revulsion and twisted by him. "Please, Harry," she said, "not now. I'm tired."

"You've considered my offer—? he started.

"Please, not now. We can talk about it later."

"As you wish, my dear. After you've rested."

With sudden overwhelming relief she heard the door close behind her and she was alone in the big room. She went over and threw herself down miserably on the bed. She buried her face in the pillow and her whole body was wracked with choking sobs.

First Dave went and now Johnny was gone. She was all alone. Even if they came back—both of them—now—it would be too late. Exhausted, she finally fell into a fitful slumber.

She didn't know how long she had been asleep, but a sound of knocking at the door woke her. It was dark in the room. She got up and went to the door. It was one of the servants. She said, "Meester Gould asked me to see if you had rested enough. And I have brought you a lamp. He told me to tell you they are already dancing downstairs."

Sally nodded and took the lamp. "Thank you," she said. "I'll be down presently."

She bathed her tired eyes and brushed her hair and then slipped into her dress. It was full skirted with a slim waist and a high neck. She surveyed herself in the mirror. She knew she was pretty when she dressed up, but who was there to be

pretty for, she asked herself dismally. No one but fat, clumsy Harry Gould; that's who she was prettying herself for.

She drew herself up straight. She was ready to go down now. She had her answer ready for Harry Gould.

She opened the door and started down the long hall. From somewhere below she heard the quick staccato sound of hoofbeats and then a hoarse yell. She could hear a heavy murmur of excitement from the hacienda porch that the thick walls could not hide. She wondered vaguely what had happened out there.

At the head of the stairs she paused before she started down. There was a rush of men into the hall beneath her and everyone was talking at once. They were crowded around a man who wore his hat at an angle that struck her as familiar. The face turned from the crowd of men and looked up at her.

"Dave!" She almost screamed the word. "Dave!"

He brushed men aside and came up the stairs on the run. Before she knew it, she was in his arms, in his strong comforting arms, and his hand carressed her hair with soft gentle strokes.

She could only cry and murmur, "Dave, Dave, oh, Dave...."

Eagerly her lips sought his. As they kissed she seemed to be in heaven, she seemed to be soaring on a billowy cloud of peace. She only knew that Dave had finally come back to her, that nothing else mattered any more.

AND THEN Dave was laughing at her and telling her how he'd known she was here. "I wanted to make better time," he said, "so I followed the old Indian trail until I got up here into country I knew. The first ranch I hit was the Beesley place sixty mile south. Old man Beesley told me everyone had pulled out to come up here for a party at the Bar Diamond, said he was left back to take care of the stock. I figured you'd be here, too, Sally, honey, so I pushed my old horse for all he was worth. I figured this

would be one party I didn't want to be late for."

"You haven't been by the Lazy K, then?" Sally asked wonderingly.

"Nope. Came straight here for my gal."

She pushed him back for a better look. He looked older, of course, but he still had that infectious smile and those black eyes she loved so well. There were tired wrinkles about his mouth, and he looked trail-weary, but he was still the same exciting Dave that she had dreamed about so often.

"Mother and Dad died last year," she said sadly. "I've been trying to manage the Lazy K alone—"

"Old man Beesley told me they'd died," Dave said solemnly. "I reckon they were good people. About the best friends I ever had."

"Come down and join the party, Dave, Sally," someone yelled below them. "You been kissin' and spoonin' up there long enough."

Dave laughed deep in his throat. His eyes met Sally's in a quick look of understanding. Together they started down the stairs.

Harry Gould stood by the post at the foot of the stairs and watched them descend. His face was a horrible thing to see, and it frightened Sally. His eyes were staring straight through her and his fleshy face seemed to grow older and was a sickly, yellow color. She gripped Dave's arm more firmly and tried to look away from the man.

As they passed, the older man said in a hoarse voice: "Where is London Johnny?"

"London Johnny?" Dave said suddenly. "Did you say, 'London Johnny'?"

Involuntarily Sally thought of the blond, handsome Johnny English. Her burst of happiness was suddenly dulled. She wondered where he had gone—and why?

"Is London Johnny in these parts?" Dave asked slowly.

No one answered him. Harry Gould shivered suddenly and violently and walked away from them, moving stiff-legged as if he were being propelled by a machine inside.

She paused, frightened by some un-

known thing. She knew then that Harry Gould had long ago guessed how she felt about Johnny English. But Dave was here now. That's all she wanted. But is it, she thought. She looked up in his strong face for reassurance, but his eyes were troubled. There was a tension in the air like a high voltage charge of electricity about to be released.

And then the thing they waited for came in the sound of hoofbeats from outside. Almost immediately a figure lurched in the door, pushing the crowd aside with one hand, the other hand clutched to his middle.

Sally screamed and Dave strode forward. The man was Charlie, the puncher who had stayed back at the Lazy K to watch things!

"They've burned the buildings," Charlie gasped. The lanky puncher was doubled up in pain. He swayed drunkenly. "They've set fire to the buildings and driven off the stock in the lower forty—" He sagged to his knees on the floor, and Sally could see with horror the blood running through the fingers of the hand that was gripped against his stomach.

Willing arms carried the dying puncher to a couch in another room. There he gasped out the rest of the story. "Whole bunch...rode in just after dark...rode in shootin'... didn't have a chance...cut me down before I could get my gun clear... got away... after...they left..."

"You see any of 'em, Charlie?" Dave asked grimly. "Would you know any of 'em again?"

But if Charlie had recognized any of the raiders, he would never tell it to those in the room. He would never tell it to anybody.

Charlie was dead.

SALLY HELD her head fiercely high, determined that whoever was responsible for this outrage would pay the stern penalty of justice. If what Charlie said were true, the Lazy K spread was wiped out. But there was no despair in her heart for that. Not now.

She heard Dave giving curt orders to form a posse. No man in the room wanted to be left out. There was a

hubbub of indignant shouts.

Then she saw Harry Gould climb to a chair. He seemed to have regained his composure again. His voice rose commandingly above the rest. "Listen to me, men! I know who is responsible for this terrible thing! An outlaw that's wanted throughout the southwest, an outlaw calling himself London Johnny!"

"No!" cried Sally in sudden fear. "No!"

Gould went on. "He's been in this neighborhood hiding out. I have seen him. He brought his gang of outlaws up here and his purpose is looting and terrorizing honest citizens—"

The fierce roar of the men around him drowned out Gould's words. Feet surged toward the door and toward the horses outside.

"No, Johnny isn't like that," Sally cried out vainly. But no one heard her, no one, that is, except Dave Shanahan.

He looked at her queerly and there was a look on his face that frightened her. For the first time in her life she saw distrust in Dave Shanahan's black Irish eyes.

CHAPTER IV

THE RIDE back to the Lazy K was like a nightmare for Sally O'Harra. Dave had secured a fresh horse from Harry Gould and he rode at the head of the posse. Sally's little pinto was barely able to keep up with the others.

In the darkness she feared the horse would stumble and go down. But the wiry little animal seemed to be able to see in the dark. He raced over the rough terrain with a sure footing, almost as if he sensed the urgency of the girl.

Sally was never more sure of anything than that Johnny English was not responsible for the burning of the Lazy K. She could not explain his disappearance that morning, and she was glad she had said nothing about it to the others.

If they caught him, she knew there would be no questions asked. They would seek out the nearest tree and a dozen ropes would be produced

for the occasion. There was no justice in the inflamed tempers of these men.

She knew from Johnny's conversation with her that he suspected Harry Gould. She herself didn't know what to think. She couldn't believe Gould would do a thing like this. True, he wanted the Lazy K badly, but as for killing and burning—that was another thing. And Harry Gould had been their neighbor since before she could remember. No, she could not believe that Harry Gould, no matter how much she disliked the man personally, would stoop to a thing like that.

But who then? Another rancher? A renegade outlaw band led by Johnny English? Or was it, for some unknown reason, Harry Gould?

She didn't know. As she raced over the prairie following the posse, she wondered for a brief instant why Gould had made that inflammatory speech against Johnny. What proof did he have; what reason could he have?

Ahead of her in the darkness there were shouts and the posse swirled to a confused halt. Sally pulled up her horse. She heard the heavy, husky voice of Dave call out, and then a voice she recognized as Sheriff Bailey's answered. Soon there was an excited confab.

"Hank Calhoun and me been snoopin' around, trying to get a lead on these rustlers," Sheriff Bailey explained. "We heard London Johnny might be in this neighborhood and we figured he might be back of it. We saw the Lazy K burning, but by the time we got there there weren't nothing left but smoulderin' ashes.

"Hank's followin' track best he can in the dark. The hombres appear to be heading south. Hank's goin' to build a big brush fire after he's been on their trail for three hours. We ought to see it, an' we can cut off in that direction."

"Well, let's go," someone shouted.

"Now hold on," Sheriff Bailey snapped, "and lissen to me. I'll take the posse and we'll go south till we see Hank's fire. Dave, I want you to get back to the ranch—or what's

left of it—because Hank'll be coming back there. He'll want to go over every bit o' ground, and I'd be obliged if you'd help him, seein' as it's your place."

"What good's it goin' to do pokin' around in ashes?" another asked. "That ain't no way to catch rustlers!"

"Hank's mighty good at piecing things together. He's got quite a reputation in the East, and the Cattlemen's Association give him t'me for that purpose. Now, you boys do as I say. Dave, you get on to the ranch, the rest of you come with me."

"That's it, boys," Dave said with authority. "We'll do like the sheriff says. It sounds like a fair plan to me. I'll catch up with you later."

AFTER DAVE had spoken, there was no dissent from the riders. In the darkness, Sally could see the sheriff wheel his mount about and start off. The others, dark, ghostly shadows, followed him. It was then that she realized how badly she had misjudged Sheriff Bailey and his deputy.

Presently only she and Dave were left there. Silently together they started for the Lazy K.

After a time Sally spoke: "Dave. You've got to believe me. London Johnny's no part of this rustling gang."

"How do you know that, Sally, honey?" Dave asked quietly.

"He just couldn't be. He's not like that." And then she told Dave how she had become lonesome for him, how she'd ridden out to the rim-rock, and how she'd heard the shots. She told Dave how she'd found Johnny, how she'd brought him in, and how he'd slowly got better under her and Old Bill Sanders' nursing.

"Well, then, if he was so sick two days ago, what's become of him now?" Dave wanted to know.

"That's what I can't understand," Sally admitted frankly. In the dark her face was perplexed and worried. "This morning when I went back to the ranch, he was gone. He must have gone willingly, because Charlie was there and he didn't hear any-

thing. I just can't understand Johnny sneaking out like that."

"Did you fall in love with him?" Dave asked suddenly, his voice deathly low.

"Oh, Dave—!"

"We've got to be honest with each other, Sally," Dave broke in. "All our lives we've told each other the truth. We can't change now."

For a moment she was silent. Then, with a tremor in her voice, she said, "I don't know, Dave. You were gone so long, and the ranch was slipping through my fingers. There didn't seem to be anything else I could do. Harry Gould wanted me to marry him, and—"

"Harry Gould!" Dave said in astonishment.

"I was to give him my answer tonight. I was going to say, 'Yes.' He had threatened to turn Johnny over to the sheriff, and I thought I could make him give Johnny a chance to get away. I knew that everything you had was in the Lazy K, so if you had all the money Gould would pay for it, you could start over again somewhere."

They rode for a long time in silence then. Sally wished she could see Dave's face, for she had no idea of what he was thinking, and she wanted desperately to know.

Finally, Dave said, "You didn't answer my question. Do you love this Johnny English?"

"It's so hard, Dave," Sally cried out. "I love you, and—yes, I love him, too. Not in the same way, but—oh, Dave, I'm so confused and mixed up inside."

"You'll have to decide which of us it'll be, Sally, honey," Dave said quietly. "You'll have to decide."

The rest of the way to the Lazy K they rode in silence, but Sally was thinking: Maybe I won't have to decide. Maybe Johnny English is gone for good, or maybe the posse will catch him and hang him. They were cruel, bitter thoughts that ate into her soul like acid. She knew in her heart she didn't want Johnny English to be lost to her forever.

The embers from the Lazy K ranch house and buildings were still a firey

red when Sally and Dave arrived. The wind picked up the loose ashes and whipped them across the prairie. Where there had once been a comfortable home, now there was nothing, only the corrals remained, and they were empty.

THE SCENE was one of desolation which made Sally shudder. Together she and Dave looked at what was left, and they both thought of the work and suffering and hardship that Mike O'Harra and his wife had put into the place. Now it was all gone; there was nothing left but a glow from the ashes that lit the drawn features of the man and woman who stood there.

"Hello, Sally," a voice from the darkness behind them spoke.

Sally and Dave wheeled and Johnny English stood there, his feet planted wide, his long arms dangling at his side.

"Johnny!" Sally cried. "Where—"

"I'm sorry I couldn't save your Lazy K," Johnny English said in that queer voice of his. "I got here just a few minutes too late."

"And I don't suppose you figured you'd bother to trail the hombres that did it," Dave rasped.

"There was no need," Johnny said. "I know who they are."

"But what happened to you this morning?" Sally asked. "I came back and you weren't there."

"Maybe I should have told you," Johnny said. "Maybe I should have explained. But I prefer to play a long hand. It's safer. I'd been going out nights for better than a week now. Feel pretty good. I knew you were losing cattle, and I wanted to have a look around—without anyone knowing it. Maybe that was why I was always so sleepy in the mornings."

"Well, today I figured I could get out all day without being missed. I had an idea something would be pulled with everyone off at the Bar Diamond at the party. And from snoopin' around at night, I had a pretty good idea who it was going to be. But they came earlier than I figured they would. I guess they

must have known the sheriff was in the neighborhood and figuring on dropping down this way."

"But who and why?" Sally asked incredulously.

"Who? Harry Gould's boys, of course. I practically told you that. And you, Sally, are the reason why. Gould wanted the Lazy K. It would give him the biggest holding in the State of Texas. But more than that, he wanted you, Sally. He figured he could force you into marrying him if he could break the Lazy K. And he played his cards pretty smart. He almost won."

Dave spoke up for the first time. "Are you sure you're not trying to pin something on Harry Gould to keep your own nose clean. We've known Harry Gould a good deal longer than we've known you. What proof have you got for all this?"

"None," Johnny admitted with a smile. "I don't need proof." In the red light his blond hair danced with brilliance. "My own eyes are proof enough for me. I recognized some of Harry Gould's boys tonight as they rode away."

"That only makes your word against theirs."

"But the way I tell it makes more sense—to everyone but you and the posse, maybe. In case you didn't notice, none of Gould's boys were at the party tonight."

"I don't like you, English," Dave said curtly, "and I don't choose to believe you."

"I've shot men for less than that," Johnny English said softly.

"That's what I mean," said Dave. "I'm giving you your chance."

"Dave, Johnny, no!" Sally cried.

"You're sore because I'm taking your girl," Johnny said with a laugh. "You figure you've got a better chance shooting it out. But there aren't many men alive who've pulled faster than London Johnny."

"You talk a lot. Go ahead, reach for it."

"Why not let Sally decide it," Johnny said with deathly calm. "It'll save you a slug in your guts."

"I'll give you three seconds to go for your gun," Dave said flatly.

HORRIFIED, Sally moved toward Dave, her eyes never leaving him. It was an unconscious movement, but Johnny English saw it from the corner of his eyes.

She saw Dave's hand dart down in a long black blur. Before his gun was halfway up, there was a shattering explosion from Johnny's six. Dave's gun flew from his fingers. A dark stain of red quickly began to color his sleeve where the bullet had nicked him.

"You're too slow for the professional crowd," Johnny said dryly.

Dave clutched his arm and stood there against the night and Sally was at his side.

"I'd have given it to you in the guts if the girl had come my way," Johnny said. "That way, I'd have known she liked me better."

Sally ripped a long piece from her skirt to bind Dave's arm. She was crying and the tears would not stop.

"And now," Johnny continued, "I'm going to do a job that I should have done earlier. I've got enough proof for myself. I'll call it a wedding present to the both of you. Will you kiss me and wish me good luck, Sally?"

Sally looked to Dave for her answer. To her surprise, he nodded his head.

Johnny English came forward and bent down and kissed her. But it was a cold kiss, as if she were kissing a statue. She was suddenly afraid for Johnny English, for in that kiss she understood his past and his future.

Johnny stood straight again. He ordered Dave to turn around. In a voice like an icicle, he said, "I don't like to do this. But I need some time that I know you won't give me."

With a sickening crunch he brought the flat of the gun down behind Dave's ear. Dave slumped silently to the ground.

Then Johnny English was racing into the dark. In a few seconds Sally heard the rapid beat of his horse's hooves fade like rifle fire in the distance. But her attention was concentrated on Dave who lay as if he were dead. She no longer thought of Johnny English.

CHAPTER V

HANK CALHOUN, Sheriff Bailey's deputy, rode up to the gutted Lazy K buildings just as Dave Shanahan's eyes were fluttering open. Despite all Sally's efforts, Dave had remained unconscious for nearly half an hour.

With Calhoun and Sally's help, Dave finally staggered to his feet. The grimace on his face told her of the pain that wracked his head. Finally he managed to say, "How long—how long has he been gone?"

"Maybe half an hour," Sally replied. "We've got to get to the Bar Diamond. He'll get himself killed there."

Dave quickly explained to Calhoun what had happened. "You head back the way you came, see if you can pick up the posse. Bring them to Gould's place. We've got to beat the Bar Diamond riders there, be there when they get back."

Calhoun nodded curtly. In seconds he was on his horse and thundering away through the darkness.

Dave said: "Sally, you stay here. I'll get there before the posse does, and if Gould's riders are back, there'll be shooting. I don't want you hurt."

Shaking her head, Sally said, "I'm coming with you, Dave. You can't stop me. I love you too much to let you take any chances. I'm going to see that you don't."

"You can't, Sally, honey. It's no place for a woman."

"I'm coming," Sally insisted firmly.

And in the end he had to let her accompany him. Their horses were tired and on the long trip back, they had to stop often to let them rest. Once, when they were walking the horses, Sally said, "Dave, we won't be too late, will we?"

IT WAS A hope and prayer more than anything else, and she knew that Dave prayed it as fervently as she did.

They rode on, pushing their tired mounts as hard as they could. The eastern sky behind them paled and

gradually a grey dawn crept into the sky. Dave's bandaged arm was pushed inside his shirt as a temporary sling.

And as the day dawned around them, Sally looked at Dave as if seeing him for the first time. He rode easily in spite of his wounded arm. He sat straight and tall in the saddle like a man should sit, and she was proud of him.

She knew that this was the same old Dave that had come back to her, the same Dave that used to make her little boats out of willow branches and tell her funny stories that set her giggling.

But what had happened to Johnny; not the Johnny that had kissed her three hours ago with a cold, passionless kiss, but the Johnny she had picked up on the prairie and nursed back to health. The Johnny who was so warm and human—what had become of him?

He was London Johnny now, not Johnny English. In a matter of hours his appealing handsomeness had turned to cold brittleness. She knew with the sureness of a woman's knowledge that her instinct had directed her right back there when she had moved to Dave's side.

Big, husky, black-eyed Dave Shanahan would never change. She looked at him and smiled, and his infectious grin smiled back at her.

They heard the first shots when they were far from the Bar Diamond ranch house. They hurried their spent horses as fast as they could. Presently they were near enough to see the situation.

It was easy enough for Sally to guess what had happened. Johnny had arrived before the returning Bar Diamond punchers, but had not been able to get away. He had barricaded himself in the house and had held them off, was still holding them off.

From the side of the bunkhouse they could see Bar Diamond punchers getting ready to rush the door. Dave said, "I've got to get in there. I've got to help him hold out until the posse comes."

Sally clutched his arm tightly. "No, Dave. You'll never make it. No

man alive could ride through the hail of lead they'll give you."

"I've got to, Sally. They'll kill him if they get in there."

"I won't let you go," she cried.

"I'm remembering what he did for you, Sally, honey. I'm remembering he could have killed me back there when I made him draw. I'm remembering that this is my fight more than it is his."

"Then if it's your fight, it's my fight, and I'm going with you."

"No," Dave said curtly. "You don't move from this spot!"

He produced another gun from his saddle bag. "I'm going to make a run for it. Keep those at the bunkhouse pinned down while I go in."

Sally took the gun and it felt heavy and solid in her hand.

Then suddenly Dave quirted his animal hard and it leaped forward. Sally held the gun in her hand for an instant, then thought: They'll need this extra gun in there.

She laced her own pinto with the quirt. The startled animal jumped, then took off in a dead run.

She crouched low over the animal's neck while ahead she could see Dave lashing his mount to greater speed. She applied the quirt again to her pinto.

As the hacienda grew larger before her, Sally heard from far off the dull explosions of their guns.

Then, ahead of her, Dave's horse was jumping to a stop and Dave was hitting the dirt. She thought at first he was hit until she saw him run over across the hacienda porch.

And how she herself made it she never remembered. She didn't remember hitting the ground or running.

Johnny English had the door open just wide enough for her to slip through after Dave.

Dave looked up in amazement when he saw her behind him. All his attention had been concentrated on getting to the door, and he'd not thought to look back.

After he'd slammed the door and bolted it, Johnny English sagged against the wall. He grinned crookedly at them, his blue eyes dulled with pain. "I timed things wrong

again," he said weakly. "I figured I could get out before Gould's punchers got back. I was a little late again."

"Where's Harry Gould?" Sally asked breathlessly.

Johnny nodded toward the far end of the room. Harry Gould lay on his back with his arms outstretched before the big fireplace. He was dead.

"He got me in the chest with a sleeve derringer before I knew what he was up to," Johnny said. "Then I killed him. He forced me to do it."

"Them jaspers at the bunk house are going to be rushing us here soon," Dave said, risking a peep through a window.

Johnny went on as if he hadn't heard, as if there were many things he wanted to say. "I couldn't find out where your cattle were," he said apologetically, but I reckon you'll find them somewhere down in that Sawtooth country. There's a hundred canyons there and you could search a lifetime and not find them. But I don't think you'll have trouble—one of Gould's waddies will most like be glad to show you—now. You'll most likely—"

"Here they come!" Dave shouted.

A line of men came rushing from the corner of the bunkhouse, guns blazing and thundering. Johnny English went over to the window, supporting himself by the wall. He stood in front of the window and fired six times until his gun was empty.

Six men lay dead and dying in the yard.

Sally handed Johnny her own gun and began to refill the empty one. Dave was blasting away as quickly as he could take aim and fire.

The charge faltered and broke and those who could, scurried for cover.

"They'll probably try the back way again," Johnny said. "They'll come through that door." He nodded his head across the room. There were splinter holes in the door already.

A bullet splintered the sill above Johnny's head. He tried to move away from the window, but without the support of the walls, he sank to his knees on the floor.

"The women and children from the party are locked in the back rooms

upstairs," Johnny said tiredly. He managed a weak grin. "It's been quite a party for us all."

SALLY PRAYED for the posse to come. While Dave stood back away from the window, risking a glance out now and then, she prayed they could hold out. She also prayed that Johnny would not die, but she knew that the small dark stain on his shirt, growing slowly bigger, was his life creeping away.

The men from the bunkhouse did not try the back way as Johnny had suggested. Instead, they tried to filter around the corners of the house and beneath the window.

Johnny sat on the floor, his gun hand supported with his other hand, and made each shot count. Dave was tight against the wall, angling his shots out the window.

Finally Dave said, "If them hombres knew a posse was coming, I'm thinking they'd be high-tailing it out of here to put as much distance as they can—"

He never finished. There was a shout outside and men started running for their horses. It was as if his words had been the magic that brought the posse into view.

Johnny looked up from the floor, a dull glaze filming his blue eyes. The smoking gun dropped from his fingers. The posse had been all he was waiting for. He leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes and died.

Sally rushed to Dave's big protective arms. She held him close and she was trembling and crying. Together they looked at the dead Johnny. "He wasn't like that at all," Sally managed to say through her sobs. "He wasn't—really like what you've seen of him."

"I know, Sally, honey," Dave said softly and pressed her closer to him. "I know what you mean."

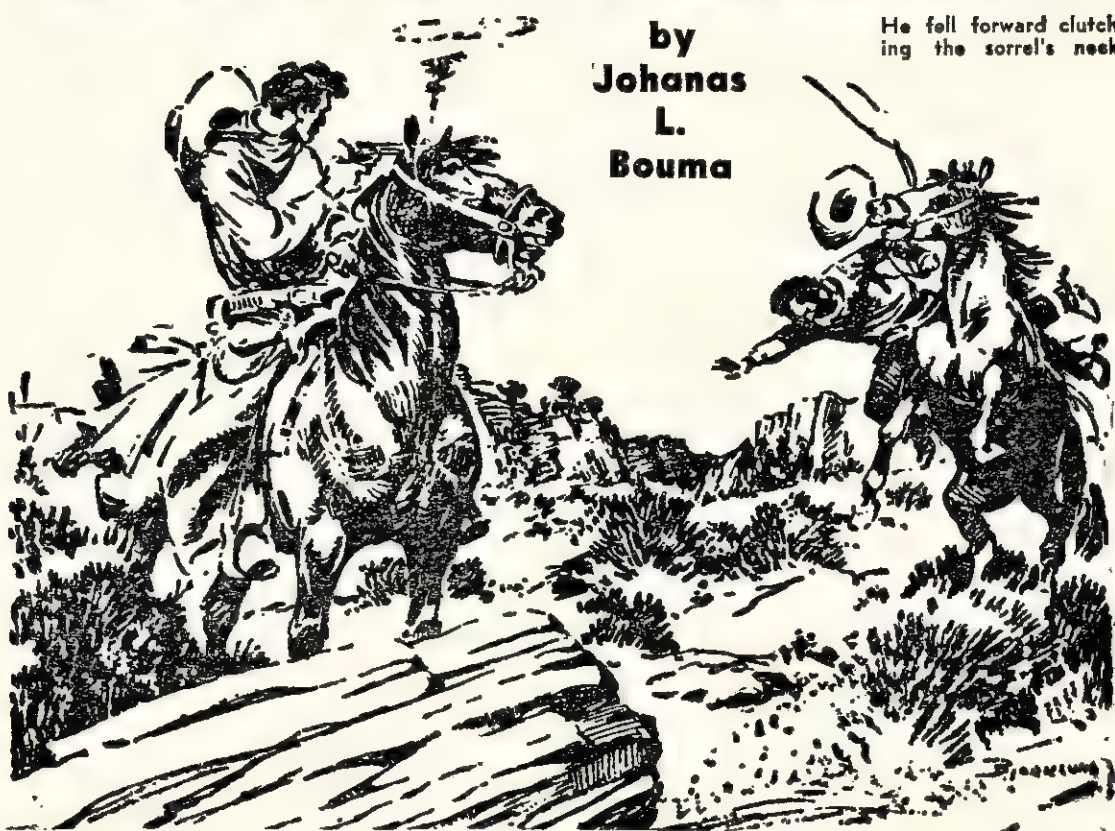
Then there was no more for them to say there. The morning sun slanting through the window caught the bright yellow of Johnny's hair and the sparkle seemed to make the air dance with a thousand golden beams.

THE END

Blood Of A Badman

by
**Johanas
L.
Bouma**

He fell forward clutch-
ing the sorrel's neck!



JIM MOORE slipped out of his blankets and flexed his thighs, still stiff after the three-day ride. He shrugged into the flannel shirt and buttoned it to the neck, hearing rasping snores from the next room. He hoped the sound wouldn't wake Dan. His brother was sprawled on the cot, next to the door, one big leg outside the blankets, the mackinaw he'd used as a pillow on the floor. He looked like he'd been fighting in his sleep.

Boots in hand, Tim stepped into the hall and quietly closed the door. He walked to the head of the stairs before shoving his feet into the boots, and he took a deep breath then, smelling the coffee, and he grinned as he clomped down the

stairs. It was the little pleasures that counted for him—coffee, tobacco, a good night's sleep. He wished Dan felt the same way.

Mrs. Calhoun was frying eggs at the big stove. She smiled good morning as Tim sat down at the table, and she poured him coffee. Early dawn outlined the kitchen window.

Pete Calhoun came in from the lobby, a broom in his thick hand. He said, "Any luck?"

"None. Tried all the big outfits and some of the smaller ones. Rode clean to Willow. Things are pretty quiet."

Calhoun nodded. "Skimpy round-up. Reckon it to be a tough winter. That goes for the hotel business, too."

Their old man had ended up dancing on the end of a rope—so Tim had promised their mom he'd never let Dan look down the dark trails...

Mrs. Calhoun put a platter of bacon and eggs in front of Tim. She rubbed her hands along her apron. "One guest this month. That drummer, Perkins. And he'll be leavin' on tonight's stage."

Calhoun poured himself coffee and drew up a chair. "I near forgot. Dan told me last night he was leavin'."

It was news to Tim. "He give a reason?"

"Just said he was sick of doin' a woman's work."

"I'll talk to him later." Tim finished his coffee, rolled a cigarette and got up. "Swampin' ain't much of a job for a young fellow. But a man's got to live with the times, and right now times is hard."

Boots sounded on the stairs and the door opened. The drummer came in. He was a big man with a rough face, and his sharp eyes covered the kitchen at a single quick glance. Tim had met him late the night before, in the lobby, and now he said good morning and went out.

The town was still asleep. Walking to Buford's livery, Tim wondered why Dan was quitting. He hoped the kid wasn't getting himself into another tight. What worried him most, though, was remembering the old man and how Dan was cut on the same pattern.

Buford had already opened up. Tim greeted him and then went on about his chores. But he couldn't keep the worry out of his head.

TIM WENT back to the hotel about noon. He found Dan in the bar having a drink. "Kind of early for that, ain't it?"

Dan's face was stiff, but there was a hint of nervousness in his blue eyes. "Never too early. It's putting it off that hurts a man."

Tim pushed his hat to the back of his head and looked at his brother.

"What's this you've been tellin' Calhoun about quitting?"

"I'm sick of sweepin' and moppin' floors."

"A man's got to earn his keep," Tim said mildly. "Next spring we'll be ridin' again. But don't talk about

runnin' out on me. Remember our plans? A spread of our own isn't just a dream, Dan."

"Three years we've been ridin', and look where we end up." Dan's voice shook. "You cleanin' stables for a dollar a day, and me doin' a woman's work for our bed and board. I'm gettin' out!"

"You want to end up like the old man?"

Dan's eyes shifted to his glass. "Don't give me the big brother stuff. I'm no wet-behind-the-ears button."

"The old man wasn't no button, either," Tim said softly. "But he spent most of his life behind bars because he never learned that a man has to work for his chips. He hated himself every minute of his life because of that. And he died dancing on the end of a rope—"

"He lived before he died!" Dan flared.

"And he made everybody miserable while he was alive!"

Tim had intended to plead with the kid, and here he was yelling at him. It made him feel ugly. He'd promised their mom he'd watch out for Dan. She'd known Dan had some of the old man in him, and she hadn't wanted him ending up the same way.

But hell, the kid was twenty-one. If he wanted to fiddle-foot there was no way to stop him. He'd have to straighten it out with himself, and if he didn't—

"I'm takin' the sorrel," Dan said. "Go ahead."

"I'll—see you before I go."

"Sure, Dan. Need any money?"

"No." The kid finished his drink and walked out.

Tim passed through the bar to the kitchen and ate his noon meal. The food didn't set well on his stomach, and when he came out he ordered a drink. He took his whiskey, not liking its taste so early in the day, but he was pouring another one when the two punchers came in. There was something familiar about one of them, but it wasn't until they turned to survey the room that he saw what it was.

One of them, the short thick man, had a scar running the length of his

slab jaw. He'd changed clothes from what he'd worn the day before.

The man's gaze came to rest on Tim, and he stiffened, then whispered to his companion, a tall lanky man with a pitted face. That man moved suddenly to Tim's side, while the scarred man circled back a little, his glass in his hand.

"Me and Gus, we'd like to have a talk with you," the lanky man said.

It was the way he said it that Tim didn't like. It was a threat, not an invitation.

Tim downed his whiskey deliberately. He put the glass down and half turned his head. "Why?"

The man's hand had dropped to cover his gun. Tim looked at him carefully, knowing the man wasn't planning to use it—not in town against an unarmed man. The hand on that gun was a threat, nothing else, and Tim didn't like it.

He turned slowly, putting his back against the bar, and lashed out with his right fist, feeling the impact. The lanky man spread-eagled six feet away. Tim rubbed his knuckles across his shirt, watching the scarred man. He said, "You fellows want to watch that proddin' a man with a gun. In this town, we don't like it."

Calhoun came around the bar, a billy in his hand. He'd seen it all, and he stood by as the scarred man helped his companion up. They moved outside. At the door, the lanky man made to jerk loose, but the scarred man had a grip on him. He muttered something and they tramped on the boardwalk.

"What the hell was that?" Calhoun asked.

Tim shook his head, puzzled. He paid for his drinks and walked back to the livery. About five the stage from Willow drove in to change horses; it would leave for Green, the nearest railroad stop, at seven.

CLIMBING from the box, the driver said, "You boys out this way hear about it yet? Payroll wagon headin' for the Rose Mine was robbed yesterday. Happened a mile from the Forks. Killed the guard and wounded the driver."

"Wonder there ain't more robbin' and killin' with times as thin as they are," Buford said glumly. He turned to Tim. "I'll take over here. Suppose you have your supper and come back in time to harness the fresh team."

Tim walked to the back of the stables and washed at the trough, then continued up the alley to the hotel. He saw the sorrel first, and Dan bending over, looking at the sorrel's left hind hoof. The sorrel was the only horse between them, Dan's old bay having sickened and died the week before.

A hide-covered saddle lay on the steps. Next to it was the kid's rolled slicker and his saddlebags.

The kid cussed a blue streak when he saw Tim. "You have trouble with the sorrel on the trip? I was just startin' out and she threw a shoe."

"I thought you were gonna see me before you left."

The kid flushed. "I was gonna stop by at the livery."

Tim didn't believe it. He could see from the way Dan had turned from the small stable that he'd meant to take the shortest way out of town.

"You'll have to take and get her shod."

The kid took a deep breath and looked around. His eyes came to rest on his gear. "How about taking the stuff up to the room? I'll be back for it fast as I can."

Tim shouldered the saddle and packed the saddlebags and the slicker under his arm. He watched the kid leading the limping sorrel to the blacksmith, then turned and saw that the sun was about done for the day. He sighed, thinking about tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that, with the kid gone, and him on his lonesome again. He would miss the kid.

Going up the stairs, he met Perkins coming down, and he spoke. But the drummer brushed past him without recognition. Tim had the feeling that the man hadn't even seen him.

He dropped Dan's belongings on the floor, wondering suddenly if he shouldn't ride with the kid. He had

enough money to buy some kind of a horse, and thinking about it he glanced at his own saddlebags hanging from a hook on the wall. He could pack and be ready by the time the kid came back. Then, suddenly, an unreasonable anger went through him and he kicked hard at Dan's saddlebags, skidding them beneath the bed. He'd planned so much for himself and the kid. A place of their own. But that didn't come easily, and Dan had turned his back. Just like the old man had turned his back each time the going got tough. Turned his back and looked for an easier way to make money.

Tim sat on the bed and rolled a smoke. He inhaled deeply, and the thought struck him that as far as he knew the kid didn't have a dime. And yet he'd refused Tim's offer of money. He stood up and walked to the window and looked out. The street lay in dusk, and a little lamp-light came past the batwings of the saloon across the street. Three men sat in front of the saddle shop, talking. Sheriff Desmond came out of his office and stood on the boardwalk, smoking his evening cigar, and Tim recognized the drummer coming from the stage depot.

He was about to turn away when he saw two men step from the shadows to confront the drummer. Tim recognized them instantly as the scarred man and the lanky man he'd had trouble with in the hotel bar. The three stood in talk, the lanky man gesturing wildly.

ALL OF A sudden Tim stopped wondering where he'd seen the scarred man. It had been yesterday morning, early, while he was cutting across the foothills from the Bar H.

Where he'd seen the man was a mile or so from the Forks, where the one road cut the Pass to the Rose Mine. Tim had come down the slanting slope to the road, and he'd watched the scarred man step from his mount and slip behind a boulder that edged the road.

The man had done a poor job of tying his horse in the brush; it was wandering uphill as Tim approached. Tim had called out and the man had

jumped and turned as if he'd seen a ghost.

"Your horse broke loose," Tim had said, gesturing uphill.

That's when Tim had noticed the scar.

Them wanting to talk to him made sense now. Because a mile from the Forks was where the payroll wagon had been robbed. The scarred man had been the lookout, and the lanky man had probably been close by.

But why were they hanging around? Had the driver of the payroll wagon recognized them? Tim looked again and the three men were gone. He was turning to the door when it opened. Dan came in.

"Listen, kid—"

Tim shut his mouth then. Dan wasn't alone. Perkins came in after him. There was a gun in the drummer's hand. Then the lanky man and the scarred man came in. The scarred man closed the door.

"What is this?" Tim demanded.

"Sit on the bed, both of you," the drummer said.

They sat on the edge of the bed. Tim looked at Dan. His brother's face was pale and had a stubborn, dogged look to it.

"Let's have it," Tim said again. "What's this all about?"

The drummer looked at the scarred man. "Maybe he doesn't know, Jeff. He looks dumb. You sure he's the one that spotted you yesterday?"

The scarred man grunted. "He's the one all right. And he knows it, too."

The lanky man breathed softly between swollen lips. He gave Tim a long stare, and there was hate in it.

"He knows plenty. We'll begin with him. Where's that payroll?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"The hell you don't!" The lanky man jumped for Tim.

"Hold it, Evers!" The drummer's fingers bit into the lanky man's arm, pulling him back. He looked from Tim to Dan, then back to Tim. "One of you heard us plan this job the other day. I forgot about the walls in this fleabag being so thin

you can hear 'em crawl. So you learned that Jeff and Evers were bringing the payroll back here and that I was gonna take it out of the country in my sample case on the stage tonight—"

He broke off suddenly at the sound of many hoofs in the street below. "Evers, go see what that is!"

EVERS EDGED to the window and looked out. "A posse," he said softly. "Yeah, there's Blake, Willow's sheriff." He turned and said viciously, "Should've made sure of that driver! Had a feelin' he recognized us. Now they'll know we're in town."

"But not where," the drummer said. "Nobody seen us coming up the back way. And that posse won't stay around here." They'll be heading for Gsun. And even if they stop they'll never suspect a drummer."

"What about us?" the scarred man demanded.

"Use your head! The minute the posse leaves you and Evers can take to the hills. We'll meet up next week at the usual place."

"Better get that money first," Evers said, coming back from the window.

"That's what I mean to do right now." The drummer leveled his gun on Tim. "One of you slipped into my room and grabbed the payroll while we were downstairs. Start talkin'."

Dan looked at the floor without answering. Tim knew then how it was. It made him sick to think about it. First the old man, now Dan."

"Where's the saddlebags I saw you bring in?" the drummer asked suddenly. His eyes darted and found them on the wall. He smiled. "Don't tell me you guys weren't planning to run out. Get 'em, Jeff. Let's see what's inside."

The scarred man lifted the saddlebags from the hook, lifted the flaps and dug around inside. Tim looked again at his brother, and he knew now that the payroll was in the saddlebags he'd kicked under the bed. The kid had learned about the money, and working for Calhoun he had plenty of chances at the key to

the drummer's room. So he'd taken the payroll and had been ready to run when the sorrel threw a shoe.

"Empty," the scarred man announced, flinging the saddlebags in a corner.

The drummer's face set. He looked at Dan. "Brothers, eh? Well, you like your brother? Because if you do, you won't like what's gonna happen to him."

Evers, at the window again, said, "Posse's mounting. There they go, takin' the road to Green."

Perkins nodded satisfaction. "Good. Now come here. This is a job you're gonna enjoy. You know what to do."

Evers grinned and jerked his gun from its holster. "You kiddin'?"

Tim had watched more than one man taking a pistol whipping. And Evers' gun looked to have a sight that could cut a face to ribbons.

The lanky man came in and brought the barrel down hard alongside Tim's head. A flash of pain came with the blow, but it wasn't hard enough to knock him out. Evers would know about that.

But this beating didn't matter somehow. What mattered was what Dan would do, watching it. Would he stand by and watch his brother take it and do nothing to stop it, or would he tell where the money was?

Evers was ripping Tim across the forehead, with the sight. Another blow twisted Tim around and he went face-down on the bed.

He heard the drummer say, "Ready to talk, kid?"

His brother was looking at him, looking at the blood running down his face. Tim sat wide open and waited for the answer.

But suddenly his brother was looking through him and saying, "I don't know anything about a payroll."

Evers grinned and stepped toward him, and Tim knew he couldn't take it any longer. The lanky man raised the gun by the barrel, chopped down with the butt at Tim's face. Tim reached out, caught the gun on the downswEEP, twisted it, driving

forward as he twisted, slamming Evers against the drummer.

A SHOT made a dull roar in the room. Evers suddenly went limp and the gun clattered to the floor, and Tim saw Dan lunging for it. Tim pushed the lanky man to one side and heard him hit the floor as two shots broke in quick succession.

The drummer had his back to the wall. Dan fired again and the drummer slid down, his heels scraping the floor. In that moment Tim turned quick as a cat and kicked the scarred man in the stomach, flattening him. Tim booted his gun out of reach. He straightened, breathing, and he grinned. "We did it, kid."

"Where is it?" Dan's voice was tight, his face a mask.

"Under the bed. I kicked it—"

Dan sprawled flat, reaching. He stood up clutching the saddlebags in one hand. His other hand still held the gun. He looked at Tim and something fought in his face. Then he started for the door.

"What are you doin'?" His voice jerked. "You can't run out now. You'll never get away with it."

"Stay back, Tim. Stay back or I'll let you have it."

"You're crazy!" Tim was shouting. "You'll take it like the old man took it—"

"I didn't steal! It was like the drummer said. I hear 'em plannin' it. There's twenty thousand here, and I'm not letting it go."

"Think about it! For God's sake, kid, think about it. You're gettin' in over your ears. Think about the old man."

Feet pounded down the hall. Dan took a last twisted look at his brother and slid out of the room. A shot sounded, the sound of a body falling. There was more than pain hitting Tim now.

He picked up the scarred man's gun and ran out. A man lay huddled by the head of the stairs. In the light from the hall lamp, Tim saw that it was the sheriff.

Calhoun and two punchers came running up the front stairs. "He went down the back stairs!" Calhoun yelled. "I heard him. Who was it? That drummer?"

But Tim was already moving. He hit the bottom of the stairs and rammed through the door, and heard the sorrel running down the alley in the darkness.

"Dan!" he yelled. "Dan, come back!" but there was no answer.

Tim knew then what he had to do. Calhoun's horse was in the hotel stable. Tim shoved the gun under his belt, found a halter, slipped it in place and mounted. There was no time to saddle up.

AT THE END of the alley, Tim turned left, the right running back through town. He hadn't gone more than a hundred yards when he heard hoofs, and looking back he saw a tight group of riders coming down the road after him. He kicked his mount into greater speed thinking that Dan would not stay on the road for long. And then he heard the cracking of brush on his right, and he knew that his brother was heading for open country.

Tim's mount was fleet. Breaking through the brush line, Tim saw the sorrel running in the lighter darkness of open country. He was well within shooting distance when he yelled Dan's name.

He could see his brother twisting in the saddle up ahead. The spurt of flame came with the shot, and Tim heard the buzz of the bullet as it passed him.

Tim rode hard behind his brother and jerked the gun from his waist.

"Either you stop or I'm shootin'!"

Dan twisted again, fired, missed.

"Dan, don't make me do it! Please, kid, don't make me do it!"

He was very close now, with the ground sloping, with his brother outlined against the lighter sky, with his brother turning and shooting once more, with the sharp click that told of an empty weapon.

Tim rode up behind his brother.

For the rest of his life he would remember raising the gun and pulling the trigger. His brother fell forward, clutching the sorrel's neck. Tim pulled up within five feet of the running sorrel.

He raised his gun for the last shot.

THE END



DEATH IN THE DUST

by FRANK LATHAM

No, nobody would get that five thousand dollars killer bounty so long as Sam Larson was sheriff . . .

CACTUS was a small town baking in the desert sun, hot and dusty.

The sound of the hammering was like an exploding cannon in the stillness of the town. Pete, a grisly mule skinner, pushed his felt back on his head and eyed the cause of the disturbance. He swung his boots down from the railing outside Pilde's Place and got to his feet and ambled over to where Sheriff Sam Larson was pounding a poster onto a shingle outside the bank.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Reward," Larson replied, mumbling slightly because his mouth was full of nails.

"Who for?" Pete asked.

"Feller name of Manners," he said. "Link Manners."

Pete eyed the sign thoughtfully. "Five thousand dollars," he said, his eyes opening wide. "What's he done?"

"Killed a bank guard and made off with ten thousand dollars more'n two years back. Far as I can remember, it raised quite a ruckus back there in Tucson. Ain't seen him since."

"Kinda late to start looking, ain't it?" Pete asked.

"They've been looking all along," Larson said. "I remember a posse stopping me once when I was on my way down here."

"That right?"

Larson nodded and hoisted his gun belt on his slender waist. "They keep boosting the reward every so often, but they'll never get him."

Pete spat a brown stream of tobacco juice into the dusty road. "Five thousand dollars," he said in a hushed whisper. "And not even a

picture so a feller'd know what to look for."

"They know what he looks like back in Tucson," Larson said.

"Well, he won't be coming here," Pete answered. "Not if he's heard about our new sheriff, he won't. Won't nobody be getting that reward while you're sheriff, Sam."

Larson smiled, glancing down at the star that had been on his chest for six months now. "Doesn't take much to be a sheriff," he said dryly. "Just a pair of fast guns, that's all."

AS LARSON walked back to the office, he thought about what Pete has said, and he smiled a little.

As Larson reached the door to the shack that served as his office, the rider loomed into sight on the dusty street. He was tall and rangy, a heavy stubble covering his chin and neck. His saddle clothes were dusty, as if he'd come a long way.

Larson paused at the doorway, his hand resting on the knob. His eyes flew to the other man's face and hung there. In a matter of seconds, his eyes shifted to the man's clothes, his guns, his horse, his saddlebags. He watched the rider pull the horse up in front of Pilde's Place.

"You look kinda thirsty, stranger," Pete said in his friendly manner.

"I sure am," the stranger said, his eyes wandering over the town, searching. They stopped on the "Wanted" poster and rested there a moment. Then they move hastily. For an instant, they turned onto Larson

(Please Turn To Page 128)

(Continued From Page 97)

Horse Mane said, in Commanche, to Larry, "The white man's whiskey is not good for my warriors. That is why I told them to kill the grass stealers who brought it."

The old Chief was probably telling the truth Larry thought, for Horse Mane was a man of his word. But if the men who had brought the whiskey also happened to be the same ones who had violated their contracts by building drift fences, and then driving more stock down on unleased ranges, then it looked as though the wise old warrior had taken the opportunity to kill two birds with one stone.

General Otis spat again. He looked at Larry. "At any rate, Sergeant, it was lucky we got here in time to protect these men from a massacre."

Larry looked the General squarely in the eye. "We had fresher horses, sir, and could have outrun them. I brought them here because they're under military arrest for delivering whiskey to the Indians to abet an uprising. I'll make a formal report to Captain Owens—"

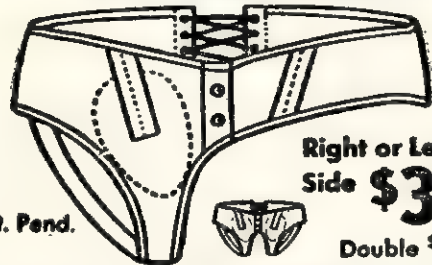
"Formal report, hell!" Blythe exploded. "General, we'll tear down those drift fences and drive all stock that Stannifer pushed down here back to our own ranges. This young man has not only saved our lives but stopped what might have been a bloody war. If anything happens to him then I'll start bringing in liquor to the Indians to keep you blue coats busy."

"Hmmm," General Otis said thoughtfully. "Better take care of your wounded prisoner, Sergeant. The Chief and I are going to have some barbecued ribs for breakfast and talk awhile. Fine job, Sergeant. Very well done."

Larry motioned for Stannifer to ride back through the lines to the surgeon's wagon. For some strange reason he was thinking about adobe bricks... He grinned at old Horse Mane as he passed, and he could have sworn that the Commanche actually winked at him. But the "very well done" was music that would ring in his ears for a long time.

THE END

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(Continued From Page 126)

DEATH IN THE DUST

and he returned the gaze fully, his hand on his gun butt.

The stranger turned his head from Larson and spoke to Pete.

"Reckon a man can get a bath?"

"Sure," Pete said. "How long you fix on staying?"

"Not too long," the stranger said, glancing again in Larson's direction, his eyes sweeping over the star pinned to the sheriff's vest.

Pete chuckled noisily. "Ain't it the truth though?"

Larson moved away from the sheriff's office, walked toward Pilde's where the two men were talking. His eyes dropped to the forty-fours on the stranger's hips.

"Howdy," he said. "My name's Larson, Sam Larson. I'm sheriff."

"So I see," the stranger said.

"Plan on staying long?"

"No longer than I have to," the stranger replied, his eyes studying Larson's face.

"Where you from?" Pete asked.

"Tucson." The stranger said.

"That's right?" Pete drawled.

"Then you know all about our poster here." He pointed to the poster.

THE STRANGER'S eyes shifted to the poster again and he wet his lips. "A little," he said.

"Think things would die down after two years," Larson said. He shrugged. "They're still looking."

"I reckon they still are," the stranger said. "I think I'd like a drink."

"They got any leads?"

The stranger wet his dry lips and smiled. "Now how would I know?"

"Seeing as you're from Tucson..."

"He headed South," the stranger said. "They're still looking."

"Think they'll get him?" Larson asked.

"You're the sheriff," the stranger drawled.

"I just thought..."

"Yeah, I know. Seeing as I'm down from Tucson."

"Well," Larson said a little uneasily, "I hope you enjoy your stay."

"Like I said," the stranger re-

plied, "I'm not sure yet, but I don't think I'll be staying too long."

The stranger ran a bronzed hand over the big black's flanks, then turned to walk into the bar.

"Reckon he knows anything about this Link Manners feller?" Pete asked.

"I don't know," Larson said slowly.

"Might be better all around if he rode out real soon."

Larson nodded and slapped the gun on his right side. Things were beginning to form clearly in his mind now. A dusty rider. All the way from Tucson. And he seemed reluctant to talk about the hunt for Link Manners. It could only mean one thing.

Larson bit his lower lip and wiped his sweaty palms on his shirt. He'd have to take him. Five thousand dollars was a lot of money.

The batwings swung apart and the stranger stepped onto the porch.

Larson backed away from the railing and both forty-fours leaped from their holsters.

The stranger hesitated a moment, swung abruptly to his right, the guns starting from his holsters before Larson even knew he'd moved.

Two reports sounded on the quiet street, and Larson reeled backwards, his guns still belching flame. The stranger rolled under the porch railing, dropped to his feet and his guns barked again.

Larson clutched at his shoulders, staggered back drunkenly.

He tried to raise the gun in his left hand, brought it to his hip. The stranger's weapons spit fire again. Larson pitched forward on his face.

The stranger stood rigid, looking at Larson's limp body.

"Finally," he said hoarsely, and Pete's mouth hung open while he listened. "Finally got you, Link Manners."

Pete looked at the body in the dust and his eyes turned in puzzlement to the man's face again.

The stranger holstered his guns, "Deputy sheriff from Tucson," he said, opening his vest to show the badge pinned to his shirt. Then he added softly, "It's bee a long trail, mister. Can I still get that bath?"

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946

Of Three Western Novels Magazine, published bi-monthly at New York, N. Y. for October 1, 1950.
State of New York) ss
County of New York)

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Robert Solomon, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of the Three Western Novels Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily, weekly, semiweekly or triweekly newspaper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Atlas New Company, Inc., 350 5th Avenue, N. Y. C.; Editor, Robert Erismann, 350 5th Avenue, N. Y. C.; Managing editor, Martin Goodman, 350 5th Avenue, N. Y. C.; Business manager, Robert Solomon, 350 5th Avenue, N. Y. C.

2. That the owner is: (if owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Atlas News Company, Inc., 350 5th Avenue, N. Y. C.; Martin Goodman, 350 5th Avenue, N. Y. C.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (if there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustee, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is—(This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

ROBERT SOLOMON
(Signature of Business Mgr.)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 15th day of September, 1950. Lydia Pearstein (My commission expires March 30, 1951). (SEAL)

(Continued From Page 68)

right!" one voice chuckled....The man next to John turned over and said, "If that son has one bullet in him, he must have a thousand. And he's got one in him all right!" the man added with a laugh.

"Yes, Beasley's dead," Jessica said softly.

Some of Beasley's henchmen must have known about John Mallard's coming into town on the prod—because that must have been why Beasley showed at the restaurant, one of his hirelings must have spotted John riding in and have reported it to Beasley—

"Were all of Beasley's crew killed then?" John tried to keep a clasp of casualness on his question this time, but he knew a frantic ring was in it regardless. And he was suddenly aware of the pain that was stiff in his body, in his head.

"A good many of them, yes.... Look," Jessica added gently but firmly, "what you'd better do is get quiet for awhile. You're not in too good shape yourself."

John suddenly felt his head whirling sickeningly. He put his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes. He felt the pillow being adjusted under his head.

Maybe one of Beasley's men—might be alive—who'd know about John coming to town—and maybe he'd—talk about it... The blackness swirled in on John Mallard then.

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THREE GUNHAWKS AND A GIRL

(Continued From Page 57)

it lit, shook out the match and leaned his shoulders against the rough bark of the cottonwood, favoring the hurt one carefully. Still frowning over the thoughts Matt Harbin had put into his head, Jim Reasoner took a slow drag at the quirly.

Annie York said, hesitantly, "Jim?"

He looked up quickly. He hadn't heard her approach, but there she was, standing beside him. Reasoner started to rise, then changed his mind and sank back again, his body too sore and tired for needless movement. He said, "Sit down, Annie. I guess you're as beat out as I am."

But she stayed where she was, looking down at him; he thought he could almost feel her nearness in the dark. She said, "They told me about the fight—"

"Quite a brawl," he agreed. "I think those brothers of yours enjoyed it. You know, they aren't such bad guys—when a man's on the same side of the fence with them!"

"Was anyone hurt? Were you hurt, Jim?"

"Me? Hunh-uh. No more than I was already." He shrugged. "A bullet scratch or two, and a headache—not too stiff a price at that, for the size of the job we did here. Personally, I'm satisfied."

"You could have been killed, you know. Maybe, the next job, you won't have it so lucky. Down at Crystal Springs, even..."

There was a reproachfulness, almost a note of scolding, in her voice. Something in it made his head jerk up, trying to see her face in the shadows beneath the cottonwood.

He said, finally, "I think you were listening, just now. You heard Matt's song-and-dance about settling, here in the valley. You want to take sides in that argument?"

"Jim, I—" She caught herself; her tone altered, became swiftly hard and indifferent. "I don't see what it would have to do with me." And Reasoner heard her turn abruptly away from him—but she didn't move any farther than a step.

THEN, SNAPPING his cigarette aside in a quick, red arc against the night, Jim Reasoner came to his feet and a hand on her shoulder made her turn again and face him. She felt solid, warm to his touch. She did not try to shake the hand away.

"The first time I laid eyes on you," he said, slowly, "someone warned me you were too wild for a man to tame. The second time, if I remember, you took a horsewhip to me. The third time—"

"Well, and what about it?" Her words were crisp but he detected a melting beneath the harsh surface of her speech.

"Why, you been throwing yourself up to me as a sort of challenge, from the day I rode into this valley. Only, there wasn't time for trying to tame a wild York colt. There was a job I had to do. Now, with that job all but finished, and time my own..."

His arms went out, seized her roughly. Holding her crushed against him, he sought her mouth; but she twisted to avoid him, small hands straining at his chest. He knew how it was with her, in that instant. She wanted him, yet she did not want to surrender her wild freedom to the will of any man. Unrelenting, he stilled her struggling, and found her lips. And under the roughness of his kiss her lips surrendered and then she was returning it.

Abruptly Jim Reasoner released her, stepping back. He could hear her breathing, lifted and quickened by the kiss. A curt laugh broke from him.

"You ain't so hard to tame, Annie!" he muttered.

After that, whirling and seeming about to walk away from her, he nevertheless halted quickly when she spoke his name. "Jim—" And when he did not answer: "Will—you be leaving the valley, then?"

He turned, went back to her; took her face between his big hands, with the rich dark hair thick and soft under his fingers. He bent, and kissed her again. "No, Annie," he told her, his voice gone quickly gentle. "I reckon—this time—I'll have to stay!"

● THE END

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